LaDoris H. Cordell

September 22, 2012; October 21, 2012; January 1, 2013

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ABA Senior Lawyers Division

Women Trailblazers in the Law

ORAL HISTORY

of

LaDORIS CORDELL

Interviewer: Florence Keller

Dates of Interviews:

September 22, 2012
October 21, 2012
January 1, 2013
Dr. Keller: Well Doris will you please state your name, where you born?

Judge Cordell: Sure, my name is LaDoris Hazzard Cordell and I was born in Bryn Mawr Hospital in Pennsylvania and raised in the nearby suburb of Ardmore, Pennsylvania.

Dr. Keller: And on what date were you born?

Judge Cordell: I was born November 19, 1949, that makes me 62, I'll be 63 two months, hence.

Dr. Keller: So what kind of place was Ardmore, Pennsylvania?

Judge Cordell: What was it, or is it now? When I was growing up?

Dr. Keller: When you were growing up.

Judge Cordell: Ardmore is a suburb of Philadelphia and it's located on the Main Line. And the Main Line is a name given to a number of suburbs outside of Philadelphia that run along the railroad, the Pennsylvania Railroad. And the Main Line is the home to Old Money in this country. So we're talking about the Heinz family, the DuPont's and many others. So Ardmore, a part of Ardmore is the home to the very wealthy and a part of Ardmore is a home to those who serve the wealthy. So my family lived, and I grew up in Ardmore, which was on ... the part of the community which I grew up was an entirely African-American community and the folks who were there, my mother, my mother's mother, that generation of my grandparent and parents, really provided labor for the wealthy people on the Main Line. We were the domestics, we were the chauffeurs, we were the chefs, the cooks, those kind of things. So the Ardmore that I remember growing up was an Ardmore where I interacted very rarely with Whites other than when I was at school. And we can talk about that in a little bit if you want. So that's really the story of Ardmore. Ardmore was really an all-white community and then during the Great Migration which was a trek of African-Americans from the South not only to the North and to the Midwest and to into the West Coast. But that started in the, the Great Migration, started in the early 1900s and my mother’s family was part of the Great Migration right when the Depression hit. They were in North Carolina and the Depression hit them in such a fashion that the money that they had, what little had in their bank accounts and savings was just wiped out. So that's the family that came up North as part of the Migration and ended up settling in Bryn Mawr and then
eventually moved to Ardmore and that’s where I was born and raised and the family home is on Aubrey Avenue in Ardmore and that’s where my parents lived and where my sisters and I grew up.

Dr. Keller: So you said your mom’s family moved to Bryn Mawr. Is that close to Ardmore?

Judge Cordell: Ardmore, Bryn Mawr, Narberth, they’re many more, they are all part of the Main Line. Yes, these are suburbs of Philadelphia.

Dr. Keller: How old was your mom when she got to Ardmore?

Judge Cordell: So my mother came with her brother and her sister after whom I was named, my Aunt LaDoris, and their parents. They came up in 1940. My mother was 6 1/2 maybe 7 years old. She was born in 1923.

Dr. Keller: So she was 17.

Judge Cordell: Let’s go back. They came up in 1929. This was during the Depression. I got my dates wrong there. So she was 6 and 1/2, I think or 7 years old. And there was two years difference between her older brother, my Uncle Earl, and her young sister, my Aunt LaDoris. So the ages were approximately 8, 6 and 4. And they came up with their parents. So she was a middle child, as am I.

Dr. Keller: So that’s how your mom’s family got to Ardmore, and your dad’s were they also part of that migration?

Judge Cordell: My father was an only child. And I only got to know his mother, my grandmother on his side. And I vaguely remember her. She died when I was still pretty little. But the story is that his mother and her name was Ida, went from the South. I’m not sure if it was Virginia or not. Then she went up to, came to Pennsylvania, and she was in the Ardmore area, but eventually, she went up to Rhode Island, to Providence, Rhode Island and I think it was because there was work there. And so went there, and met my grandfather and married him and had the one child, was my father. And my grandfather’s last name was Hazzard, love that name, with two Z’s but that’s how we spell it, but I heard originally, it was one Z. And then got changed, just because it got changed when the family relocated back to Pennsylvania. So she then divorced and came with my father, Louis Hazzard, and came back to Pennsylvania to the Ardmore area. And she ended up working as a domestic, as did my mother’s mother. And my father was then raised. He spent some time in Virginia because relatives were sometimes helping out to raise him. And then primarily in Ardmore.

Dr. Keller: Just as an aside, out of curiosity, and I don’t want to spend a lot of time on that, your family has been in the United States, both sides, for a while, I presume.
Judge Cordell: Yeah.

Dr. Keller: And I presume, were they part, if you will, of the Great Migration from Africa to America.

Judge Cordell: I think, I mean, I think, without exception, every African-American that’s here was part of, I don’t call it the Great Migration, was a forced migration, or forced immigration, of Africans to this country. So just as an aside, I’m curious about my roots on both sides, in terms of where from Africa we came, and slaves, basically, were brought from West Africa here, but I really wanted to know. So I actually went on one of these registries to try to find out my roots and basically that’s taking a swab in the cheek for the maternal side. I just had to swab my cheek. My father, because he was an only child, was the only one we could swab. Because he didn’t have any brothers or sisters, and so I was able to swab his cheek. Then sent them in for processing. They came back, that on the maternal side, our roots are indeed West Africa and either Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, and there was one other country that I can’t recall. And then on my father’s side which was interesting, was a very thin envelope I got back, and it said there was no African ancestry that it was all Caucasian and that was a shocker to me. My father was African-American, but I don’t understand all the stuff about DNA but his, that paternal line all the way back was indeed White. And that makes sense to me, New England, Rhode Island, slaves were there, they built Brown University, so there was probably inter-marriage and stuff going on.

Dr. Keller: So your forbearers were in fact slaves.

Judge Cordell: Yes, and indeed I do know on my mother’s side that my great-great grandmother and my great grandmother, one’s name was Dolly and the other was Easter. I don’t know their last names, they, in fact, were slaves. And when there was the Emancipation, my great grandmother was about 12 years old. So that I do know. And wherever they were enslaved, they eventually, after they got their freedom, the family moved to North Carolina to a town called Weldon and that’s where my mother, and my aunt and my uncle, the three were born. They were not born, none of them were born in a hospital, in Weldon because Blacks were not allowed in a hospital. So they were born in a house in which they lived with a midwife in Weldon. So back to Ardmore.

Dr. Keller: What did you parents do in Ardmore?

Judge Cordell: My mother graduated from high school and my father graduated from high school and after they married, my father was drafted into the army and he

Dr. Keller: Was it during the war?
Judge Cordell: It was during that time. And he was not sent down. He was a musician and he ended up providing and playing in these army bands and entertaining the troops. So he did that. After he was out of the military he enrolled in AT&T, an agricultural and technical college in North Carolina. And excuse me A&T and he had to pick a trade. That’s what they were there for. Again there’s this whole thing because the Blacks couldn’t go to the standard universities plus they couldn’t afford any way. So of the available professions, he chose being a tailor. So he went to school and learned how to be a tailor. And in order to complete that education, you actually had to make a suit from no pattern, you just had to make a suit which he did and he ended up taking that and coming back to Pennsylvania with my mother and decided to open a drycleaning business. So that’s what they did. And that business, he kept that business for 40 years in Ardmore, in the Black part of Ardmore. Many of his, most of his clientele was from the Main Line, were wealthy Whites and that business, my mother and father worked in that business, supported our family, and because of that business and the income it generated, we were able, all three us, my sisters to attend college.

Dr. Keller: Did you father keep that suit? Did you ever see it?

Judge Cordell: I’ve never seen the suit. But I heard he made that suit.

Dr. Keller: And your mother, what did she do after high school?

Judge Cordell: My mother went to work, she could not go to college because they didn’t have the wherewithal and so she ended up doing some sort of secretarial work. She’s so smart and very well organized. And she told me just recently, she worked, at one point, I think this was a realtor’s office and she decided, at some point, she had been working for them to take vacation with my father, just to be away for a couple of weeks and she got a phone call during the vacation saying, will you please come back here. And apparently one of the owner’s daughters filled in and it was apparently a total mess. She’s just really, really good organizer, recordkeeping, whatever. So it was unfortunate she didn’t have an opportunity to go onto college. No telling what she might have done. So she did that, and after that ended up working in the drycleaning business with my father. So she’s the one who took care of the books, ran the business, and did more than that. She waited on customers, and she ended doing some of the actual work, the drycleaning work that was involved. As did the three of us, we worked, my sisters and I had to work, Spring Cleaners, because it was on Spring Avenue in Ardmore, and we worked there in the summers. It was hot and I really didn’t like it, but we did. So they worked together, and they lived together, and had their family together. That’s a lot of togetherness. My father loved to work. He just loved to work. And my mother was the one who was home with us when she wasn’t, we called it the shop, when she wasn’t at the shop and of course when she was having kids, she wasn’t working there. But they, my mother was telling me recently that my father he just trusted her completely. So
he had no clue about paying the bills and putting money in savings. He just completely trusted her. So he would go to work. Say here it is. Here’s all the money. She bought all of us clothes. He just never had time and had little inclination to go shop and buying clothes. He was immaculately dressed. So yeah, it worked out. He never questioned her. She, if you want to work, that’s fine. And that was really his calling. He just wanted to whatever it was. So it was a partnership, a marriage, that worked well from them and for us.

Dr. Keller: Us, whose us?

Judge Cordell: Us are my sisters and I, so as I told you, I’m a middle. It’s not quite the same as my mother being a middle. Because the oldest one in my mother’s family was a male, my Uncle Earl. He was a very handsome man and just got doted on. So she was more like, when she came along, she was like the oldest in many ways. So she literally had a lot of responsibility as among the three. So mine, I’m truly, a middle. The older sister, four years between and Roxanna and me, and then I’m two years older than Denise.

Dr. Keller: So what was it like for you being a middle kid?

Judge Cordell: Was it like for me. I think the question is better what was it like for them? I think I got on their nerves. I was someone who, I was pretty precocious, I talked a lot. High energy and obnoxious, I’d get, I’d pick on my older sister and she was larger than I and I didn’t have the common sense enough to move when to stop. Poking my finger in her arm or getting her in my face and I’d get walloped. I was closer because of the two years difference to Denise, my younger sister. And we were very close growing up. Just kind of did everything together. And I think I was kind of the boss of her which was, not good, but I was two years older and we were closer in age. So I had fun growing up. On our street, Aubrey Avenue, was the street. It went from being an all White street before the Great Migration. It eventually gradually became all Black. And this is a street of houses that are 2 houses connected. So you can picture it. Rights of there and common role between the houses. There are sets of these houses all the way up the street.

Dr. Keller: Kind of town houses.

Judge Cordell: Well, sort of. And these were three story. Three story houses and there were front porches. And the big thing, everybody in the summer, spring fall, sat on the front porch, their front porches and everybody knew everybody on the street. I could name you every family on the street and there were lots of kids on the street with whom I grew up with, with whom I went to school. And we were allowed initially to go up half way up the street. My parents, my mother took it as very strict. You could go halfway up the street on our side of the street. And then as we got older we could further up the street on our side. Then we could also go across the street to the laundry field. So half way on the
other side of the street was the St. Mary’s Laundry. And it was a laundry. And to get to the laundry was a long driveway. And there was this big field, also, before you got down to the laundry. And that’s where we really spent every summer, every fall and winter, at the laundry field. Playing softball, playing kickball. And that’s where we really grew up. And we could go to the laundry field. But we couldn’t go anywhere else on the other side of the street. You could wave to people but it was really, that’s how it was. I mean everybody was watching everybody, making sure everybody was safe. So it was a lot of fun. I was a tomboy. I loved playing all kinds of sports, football, tag football, softball, kickball, you name it. We used to have foot races up and down the middle of the street. It was a fun time growing up.

Dr. Keller: So did the girls play football? Did the boys let you play.

Judge Cordell: The girls, everybody played softball and everybody played kickball. I always wanted to play football. I just remember nagging my parents. I really want a football. And it was no, no. But I did get a football for Christmas and I just loved it. I just love sports. It didn’t matter. So, no I don’t remember any, there may have one other. I don’t remember any girls who wanted to be out there when the guys were out there throwing football.

Dr. Keller: You played.

Judge Cordell: You better believe it, I was obnoxious. I told you that. Don’t tell me no. Except for the mother. Tell me no, I back off.

Dr. Keller: So you started school as some point. Do you remember how old you were? Do you know how old you were?

Judge Cordell: We didn’t have kindergarten when I started where I went to school. You have to picture this, Aubrey Avenue and this is a nice long street, lot of trees, just a nice street. But at the very top of the street was a street running, cross over, that’s called County Line Road, and that really was the county line. So because Aubrey Avenue was on one side of the County Line, I went to school that all my friends who lived on the other side of County Line attended another, in another county. So I lived in Delaware County and we lived in Haverford Township so I went to public schools, all of us did, went to public schools in Haverford Township and they were predominantly White. So I was always used to be the only Black kid in my class. We didn’t have Latinos, we didn’t have Asians at the time so there were Whites, a lot of Jews, and Blacks. And they were Blacks from Aubrey Avenue and in Bryn Mawr there was a street that was Preston Avenue and Buck Lane, and those were Black folks. And as I got older, it was Bus 13 that would Black kids. So I ended up going initially. We all went to the same, meaning my sisters and I, same elementary school, same junior high, we didn’t call them middle school, and the same high school. We all went to Chestnutwold Elementary School and then on the Haverford
Junior High School and Haverford Senior High School.

Dr. Keller: What percentage would you say, the kids in the schools to which you went were in fact Black.

Judge Cordell: Well, when you consider that it was very rare. I never had another Black student in any of my classes. So it seemed that during the day. No but so, very small percentage.

Dr. Keller: Maybe 3%.

Judge Cordell: Maybe, if that high. It may not even been 3%. But a very low percentage. And never had a Black teacher.

Dr. Keller: Did you want to go to the other school? The one on the other side?

Judge Cordell: I just didn’t think about it. This was our world. Going to Chestnutwood and everybody on my street, we all went to the same school. So no, it was fine. I’d see these other kids who lived in Lower Merion Township in a different county, that was Montgomery County when I’d go to church because church was on the other side of County Line Road. So that’s where I’d see a whole bunch of Black folks, Black kids. But they lived on the other side of County Line, so they went to different schools.

Dr. Keller: So you started first grade. You didn’t have kindergarten.

Judge Cordell: Right. It was first grade.

Dr. Keller: How old were you.


Dr. Keller: So, it was really your first exposure then to a predominantly White universe.

Judge Cordell: Right.

Dr. Keller: Do you remember that. What your response.

Judge Cordell: Oh yeah. It was, I don’t remember responses when I was really little because I think race meant anything when I really little, but when I got to third grade, fourth grade, it’s become more apparent because I would leave this all Black world on Aubrey Avenue and I would walk, we walked to Chestnutwood, and as we walked, we’d go through, go down some streets, that we weren’t allowed to go down during the day, but these were all White folks on these streets and we saw them, it was fine, we never had an incident, and then get to school. And then it’s basically dealing with all White teachers, and mostly all White
students, and then come home. Walk home down those streets and end up back on Aubrey Avenue. So it was something I didn’t even think about. Because it was just a matter of course. This is your world. If you live on Aubrey Avenue and your Black and you go to Chestnutwold, this is your world. This is what you do. So I think, we just made adjustments and it wasn’t much of an adjustment meaning my mother, for example, is a stickler, raised us on speaking proper English. So the word ain’t and anything improper, it just did not happen. So there wasn’t any kind of big culture shock when I went to Chestnutwold. We were good students, I was always. I was perfect. I was perfect in elementary school. Did everything the teacher wanted. Teacher’s pet kind of thing.

Dr. Keller: Really, you were the teacher’s pet.

Judge Cordell: Yeah, occasionally yeah. I really worked hard. And I’m not stupid. There were a lot of kids smarter, but I worked really hard and so on the main, I had very good experience. I can think of the big negative and that was about sixth grade. Sixth grade. Now we’re talking the late 50’s early 60’s and for whatever reason, my father decided he wanted to run for the PTA president. Now this is unheard of. We’re talking all White, never been anything other than White and here’s my father who, he was a ham, I say was because he died in 2008. But this man he could just get up in front of people, talk and my mother was really kind of his coordinator. She would make sure he was prepared and ready. She’s not one who wants to get in front of people although she does very well doing that. He got real pleasure from it. He was a ham. So he decided that there were things he really wanted to do. He wanted to, okay, so low and behold he gets elected PTA president. And I just remember sixth grade. This was a big deal. Because nobody talked about race really. No no. And there was a girl, a classmate of mine, her name was Grace, I can’t remember her last name, and for whatever reason, this odd notion of my father being the PTA president did not sit well with her. And she said something to me that was very racist, she called him a nigger at some point. And that was not good cause this was one of the first times I’ve had to deal with that kind of thing. There was one other incident early in my life where the whole nigger thing came up. So we got into it and I don’t we actually got in a fight or something but it wasn’t good. And I can’t even remember the outcome of it, because I do remember the upset where she said something that was totally inappropriate and I mention this other incident. I think maybe I was 7 or 8 and I was with my mother and we were at the market or wherever and out in the parking lot, loading the groceries back into the car and I had the shopping cart and the grocery cart and I accidentally, and I really think it tapped the car next to ours, and there was a big White guy, gets out and he went off, nigger, blah, blah, blah and I was a kid and I think that was the first time I ever heard nigger. And so my mother’s there and you know my mother, she just said, don’t do that. So she went off. She just laid him out, straightened it out, and that was the end of that. Put the cart back, got back in the car and went on about her
business. So we didn’t talk about it, didn’t debrief, just, she just, we never talked about it. We never talked about hurtful stuff and I think that was the notion. She wished it probably did not happen but it had, but it did, and we went on. I don’t think it left any scars on me, unlike that guy, I hope he’s dead. But other than that though.

Dr. Keller: Do you ever remember mulling it over, thinking about it.

Judge Cordell: No, no, just move on.

Dr. Keller: So going back to the sixth grade and Grace. Did that taint the rest of the year, the class or was that pretty much an isolated incident.

Judge Cordell: It indeed was isolated. And if I remember right I think the sixth grade teacher. Her name was Miss Deveraux, I think she stepped up and had words and straightened it out. That was okay. This is something I think my parents would have been down at the school and I think it was handled by this woman. By the way I was her pet so, I think she was particularly protective.

Dr. Keller: So in retrospect being the lone Black kid in each class in elementary school, do you see how that had an effect one way or the other.

Judge Cordell: I’m sure it did. I’m sure it had an effect on me because I, you know, it’s about learning almost immediately in these very different worlds, at a time when you do not talk about race, when there’s still segregation and everything else going on. And the country about to get. With the civil rights thing going on about the blow up everywhere. Oh I’m sure I learned some survival skills, I learned how to cope. How to adjust. Say what I needed to say in order to survive and do well. And then I could be myself when I came back home. I was different. I know I was. I was just more relaxed being home, being on Aubrey Avenue than being in the other world. But I learned to adapt. So I wasn’t walking around tense all the time. I had to keep my mouth shut at times and straight through junior high and high school. And I was again a stellar student, class president, I don’t know how many years. All that kind of stuff. So, yeah. I don’t see it as a scar. It really gave me more coping mechanisms to deal with being Black living in a world in which the folks with whom I were predominantly White. True in college, less in college, actually, true in law schools, certainly true in the professions that I’ve chosen, where I was again the only one. The only one. And in figuring out how to cope. I didn’t have to figure it because I’d been so conditioned about how to do that.

Dr. Keller: Almost bi-cultural

Judge Cordell: Actually it is. And I’m not unique. I don’t want this to sound unique. I am not unique. Black folks of my generation, of my age, everyone, there are so many of us that absolutely had the same experience.
Dr. Keller: So that was through the sixth grade, then you went to junior high.

Judge Cordell: Um huh

Dr. Keller: Was that in Haverford also?

Judge Cordell: Absolutely, Haverford Junior High. More of the same, being the only Black one in the class.

Dr. Keller: Did you make any close friends of the White kids.

Judge Cordell: Absolutely, but there was an unspoken rule. You don’t go visit each other’s houses. So I had very good friends. I ended up having a crush on one of them in high school. And no you don’t, never have any White person that I remember, other than maybe a sales person coming through, ever been to our house. And I’d never been invited to go to any of their houses. So, it was just an understood rule, it wasn’t even an expectation. So there was no disappointment, it just didn’t happen. Cause it wasn’t supposed to happen.

Dr. Keller: Interesting. So junior high, you remained a pet.

Judge Cordell: I was a good student. I was a good student. I like academics and I was actually a tomboy but at that time they didn’t have women sports, were just non-existent. And they’re still having women’s basketball was half-court, and two dribbles and you had to pass. I just never played any organized sports in junior high or high school. I wish I had. Maybe that’s why, with my own daughters they did and I just loved it. And I was kind of out playing it out through them.

Dr. Keller: So then you get to high school.

Judge Cordell: More of the same. That’s when I really shone. That’s class president and my younger sister and I performed in, there was an annual talent show. It was a big deal. And we were usually the last act because we were the best, quite frankly. And we sang. And my older sister Roxanna also, beautiful voice. She was four years so we were never really in the same school at the same time but talent show, big star. So for me, high school, yeah. Academics and then doing the extracurricular things and making sure I was in the National Honor Society and the National Merit finalist or whatever, honorable mention. And then doing all of the student activities.

Dr. Keller: Did you ever feel like you were proving anything at that time or did it feel like just what you wanted to do.

Judge Cordell: No, I’m sure, as I think back about it, that I had, part of my motivation was to prove, not so much to the students, to these teachers cause I never had a Black teacher that I was of worth and as an African-American, as a Black person. So I wanted to dispel any kind of notion that they might have had. Who is this
person sitting here in this class because I was in a lot of the advanced classes. And I had to step up. And that I’m sure a part of it and I tried so hard to make sure that they noticed. And they noticed first of all I was the only Black person and I was getting very good grades. My whole thing was in high school, straight As. That’s all I was interested in. I enjoyed being in the classes but I wanted straight A's and would I get a B, oh no. No. no no. So it was that kind of thing and it just became a part of who I was and I enjoyed it. Don’t get me wrong. I liked doing the work. But I also liked being noticed and being noticed for being smart.

Dr. Keller: Your older sister, Roxanna. Had she been a start also?

Judge Cordell: She was a star I think in a different way. So my two sisters for example were cheerleaders and that was a big deal in high school because the cheerleaders were always these White females and you had to be able to do a cartwheel and that’s why I never tried out for cheerleading because I cannot to this day do a cartwheel. My legs are bent and they do cartwheels and splits and all of that stuff. So they did that. And it sounds like maybe not a big deal but it really was a big deal. Living next door to us was the Collins family. Mrs. Collins, Mr. Collins and there were 7 of them. All older than the three of us, my sisters and I. But we all grew up together and they were cheerleaders. Some of them at Haverford. At least three of them were. Maybe even four. This was significant. You had to try out and do the whole bit. I tell you one thing, the racism. And even cheerleading. So Roxanna makes the cheerleading squad. And she goes, then they tell her, you’ve made it but we don’t have any of the cheerleading outfits for you. So they pointed out we don’t have any and that was a, the colors at Haverford were crimson and gold. So that was either a crimson or gold pleated skirt and then they had the sweater and they didn’t have any pleated skirts. They just ran out. How convenient. So it was very disappointing. So what did my mother do, she sat up that night, she got the material, she sat up all night, my mother, the woman can sew, and made the skirt so when Roxanna went the next day, she was able to do cheerleading. You’re not going to do this to us. But it was those kind of things that, we had to deal with. They did that. Everybody did well in school. I think that I did better. And, I think I kind of had the reputation even in the family of having this one of knocking out those As and taking care of business. I think Denise did very well too. She was much quieter than I and, as I said, I was pretty obnoxious. I think I became less obnoxious as I got into high school because you can’t be class president I think and be obnoxious and get on people’s nerves. But.

Dr. Keller: What was the expectation of your parents for the three of you once high school was completed.

Judge Cordell: My parents’ expectation, one was that, first of all we were going to speak and write properly. And second, that education would absolutely continue beyond
Haverford High School. Everyone, each one of us, we were told, you are going to college. So that was on the plate. That was a given. The only question was where. That’s all. And we all did it. Thanks to my parents. So Roxanna went to Central State University, a historically Black college in Ohio. I went to Antioch in Yellow Springs, Ohio which doesn’t exist now, but is making a comeback I hear. And Denise went to Penn State.

Dr. Keller: How did Antioch become your choice.

Judge Cordell: Antioch became my choice because the woman who was married to my Uncle Earl, said to me have you ever heard of Antioch. No. So I started to look at. That’s how. Because I did apply to the University of Pennsylvania, by the way high school counselors, here I am, straight A, honor society. Do you think any of those counselors, you should apply to Harvard and Yale, Brown. And I was clueless.

Dr. Keller: What did you recommend.

Judge Cordell: I can’t even remember. It wasn’t any of those. I would have applied had I been encouraged to. So I ended up. I think I applied to Rutgers, and Penn only because I lived right near Pennsylvania. I wasn’t thinking about. I got in everywhere. I did not apply to Bryn Mawr because that would have been in my backyard. I really wanted to move out a little bit. So that’s why Antioch came on. So I looked into it and it interested me very much. So I applied and I got in. So I had to decide where I was going to go and that’s what I chose.

Dr. Keller: What about it interested you.

Judge Cordell: Their co-op program and no grades. So all my life it’s just grades, get grades, get grades and this was an institution that said we don’t give grades. You can pass or fail. But we don’t give them because we want people to learn to learn. So that was interesting to me. And the other was going to school only three months at a time. So every three months you had to pack up and go somewhere. Anywhere. They had a list of what are called co-op jobs. You could go anywhere in the world you want. And it’s basically combining active learning with in addition to the academics. So I liked that. I liked the whole idea about getting out and doing something different. So that’s why I chose it.

Dr. Keller: Antioch was a private college.

Judge Cordell: Yes. Probably a little pricey. Very expensive.

Dr. Keller: You get a scholarships.

Judge Cordell: Yes I did, I applied for scholarships and then I had to have loans. It ended up, I ended up getting loans to getting loans to go to Antioch and loans to go to law
school. And it took me almost 15 years to pay off all my student loans. And I worked. At college, I worked at the Antioch Inn, waited tables, did what I needed to do.

Dr. Keller: So you went to Antioch and what was that experience like for you.

Judge Cordell: That was a very important part of my development. One, it was the first time I was away from home. Second, it was at the time I went there in 1967 and was there until 71, so this is Black Power. And when I went to school, I had my hair straightened and it was fairly short and by the end of the year, I had the biggest Afro you've ever seen. It is big because its Black Power and Power to the People and try to recognize and understand my roots. So and there ended up being a Black dorm so we isolated ourselves, segregated ourselves. It almost sounds like, we're kind of gone backwards. Right. All this work in the civil rights movement, integrate. Nope we want to be our Black dorm. So Antioch had the Black dorm and we had the brothers there providing security cause we knew we were going to be attacked. And it was a very interesting time. Okay and really, at this time I grew up. I had to make some decisions also when I would go on my co-op jobs. I went to the Mississippi Delta on my very first co-op job. Here I am 17 years old, never been away from home, I get to Antioch, I started in July and in July, August, September, I had to go. Time to go. So I packed up and went to Mississippi to the Delta because I wanted to be more a part of a Black community, I wanted to know, I really wanted to know the Deep South so I went to the Delta. And I lived there for three months and set up a tutoring center on the Delta for Black kids where the schools had just then, we're talking 67 begun to integrate. Black people going to White schools and they were way behind. And so the tutoring center was there to do that. I learned a lot during that time. There was a bombing. This was in Tupelo, Mississippi. I stayed in Tupelo a little bit before I ended up where I was going which was Myersville, which is right on the Delta. You could look across the Mississippi and see Louisiana. I'm in the Deep South where it's very rare to see any light skinned Black folks, very little mixing of the races, meaning slavery hit and Black folks sent us from Africa and you don't find very much of a mixing. Very rare to see anyone of my complexion there. But I was in Tupelo when there was a bombing across the street and I have never. It was amazing. Dynamite, just blew the front of this house up. Right across the street and that was my first exposure to the FBI and being interrogated by FBI agents. The following day they came right on the scene to investigate the bombing and I was questioned in a room. I think there were two FBI agents that scared the heck out of me. Both of me them were White. Basically gave me the message that I needed to get out of there and go on back home where I belonged. I chose not to. But I stayed and left. And I would eventually would move on to Myersville and that's where I really was the bulk of the time.

Dr. Keller: Just before we go to that, was it hard for you leaving home?

Judge Cordell: Yes. I remember going to Antioch and my mother is one that took me. I think
we rode the bus or a train. I have to check. I can’t remember. It was a long ride. So we get settled in. I get my room. And then she said, okay. See ya. What? I remember her going off in a cab back to the bus station or train station. And there I was, and yeah it was hard. What am I supposed to do now? And I remember walking around the campus. Let me find some Black folks and I didn’t see any. What the. Of course, eventually, I settled in. And it was fine. But it was really my start on getting out and seeing the world. And that what so many people call it. It’s so important. There’s so many people, they’ve never been away. This is the time. Don’t go to college down the street, in the backyard. Get out and do it. So that was really part of forming me. Getting away and having to make decisions about what I wanted to do.

Dr. Keller: So back to Mississippi. Was somebody killed in that house?

Judge Cordell: Nobody was killed. And he was either a dean or some other official at Tupelo College which is another historically Black college. It was a very tense time.

Dr. Keller: And you sent to Myersville.

Judge Cordell: I went to Myersville.

Dr. Keller: And that’s where you created this tutoring center?

Judge Cordell: I didn’t create it. It existed. But there was nobody there running it, so I got in and helped get it organized and then yes, it was part of it.

Dr. Keller: How long did that run, do you know?

Judge Cordell: Don’t know. It was running when I left and met a lot of wonderful people. One of the women I met there was Anita Blackwell. And she lived in the town, she was very outspoken. A good force. And I’m surprised she survived. She was very outspoken. And her son, I think his first name was Jeremy. He was light-skinned. Which was very interesting. He was about my complexion. And her husband was kind of light skinned but that was it. Everybody else was very dark. She was very dark skinned. Anita Blackwell went onto get a McArthur. And she ended becoming the mayor of Myersville a few years later. So she is somebody who really had an impact.

Dr. Keller: So you were there for 3 months I presume.

Judge Cordell: Until Christmas. Then back to Antioch.

Dr. Keller: Where was you next placement?

Judge Cordell: Let’s see. Next I decided to leave the country. And I decided to go to Mexico because I thought I want to be a Spanish major. Espanol. So I studied Spanish all through junior high and high school. I took Spanish at Antioch and decided,
I can speak Spanish although not as fluently as I would like. And queto in Mexico, studia in University De Guanajuato. When I lived in Mexico, I studied at the University of the Guanajuato. I lived in Mexico for three months. All the classes were taught in Spanish. I got to travel in the country and I saw racism there which really turned me off to Mexico. The racism I'm talking about are the dark skinned. The Indians, the indigenous folks, the poorest treated, not well and the lighter skinned more Spanish Mexican's were the ones who controlled the wealth and it just turned me off. I thought I left the United States. So it was a trauma. I came back and I decided I didn't want to study Spanish anymore and I switched majors to theater.

Dr. Keller: Were there many African-Americans in Mexico?

Judge Cordell: I saw very few if any. No. I was just there and my roommate was a White female, blond and all the Mexican males. She just had anybody she wanted. I was just sort of hanging on there. It wasn't a great time. I think I would have learned much more Spanish and would have been fluent when I came back had I had a better experience just socially which I didn't.

Dr. Keller: Then you came back here.

Judge Cordell: Back to school.

Dr. Keller: Did you have a history of theater?

Judge Cordell: No, I've always loved the stage, the theater. When I was growing up my parents didn't have a lot of money but my parents would take us occasionally. We would get on the bus or drive or train and go to New York to Broadway. And I remember seeing, we saw My Fair Lady. Then when Black folks really started coming to Broadway, my parents made it a point, we are going to see these plays. We saw Pearlie Victorius, we saw Hello Dolly with Pearl Bailey and Cab Calloway. I've always loved theater and my family is a musical family. My sisters and I grew up singing together, three part harmony it just happened. In the church we went to which is a Black Baptist church. I grew up playing the violin. That was started in the third grade. We were each given an instrument in public school, given an instrument. I was given a violin. My sister Denise was given a cello. So we played violin and cello straight through third grade until we graduated from high school.

Dr. Keller: You were telling us LaDoris about the fact that you all played the piano and how your mother seemed to have some.

Judge Cordell: Right, my mother somehow, and I don't know how they did it. She bought a piano. An upright. Not a real tall upright and it was sitting in our dining room. I remember it against the wall. She bought that piano. And I started piano lessons when I was 5 or 6, Roxanna started when she was older than I started, before and Denise. We all took piano lessons. And I asked her about that. My
father plays the clarinet and played just about every woodwind instrument. Loved the saxophone. Loved the clarinet. And my mother didn’t play the piano. But I think she told me she really would have had she had the opportunity to take some lessons, and I think her mother whose name is Roxanna. I think she also played the piano. Not by reading music, but by ear. So anyway, music was always a part of our lives. And I think you were asking about theater. Is that where we got that?

Dr. Keller: I asked you how you got into theater. That’s right. You said you were a performer. You performed on the violin. Violin, piano.

Judge Cordell: Violin, piano. The Black church is a great place, if you decide if you want to go into theater, one way to find out if you’re comfortable is that kids are always standing up in front of congregation doing things. At Christmas and Easter, you got to get up and say your pieces. These were basically verses and you older you got the more, the longer they became. So we were used to as very little, getting up on the front of the congregation, up on the pulpit and doing these programs. And I took it very easily and I think I got the ham gene from my father. What can I tell you. And then there was also just the singing, the three of us. We just didn’t have a problem singing. And one of the things I remember is we would go on day trips with my parents. We would just go to the Crystal Cave which is up in another part of Pennsylvania and you would see these stalactites, and whatever they’re called that hang down from the cave. On these long trips the three of us, my sisters and I would sit in the back seat and we’d sing. We sang a cappella three part harmony and nobody taught us. We just did it. It’s just what we did. So theater, once I decided I didn’t want to do Spanish, and I actually started studying Portuguese, and then I just said, no I really want to use college to have a little more fun. And that’s when I said, let me just try theater. And Antioch had a wonderful theater program. It had a wonderful Shakespeare program that brought in these professional actors. It was just amazing. They had an outdoor amphitheater, so I was there at a good time and one of my drama teachers was the model for Howdy Doody. He was the actual person, not made Howdy Doody but was the face of Howdy Doody. So it was, it was the right thing for me to do, because it really prepared me for my next venture which was into the law.

Dr. Keller: We will get back there but before that will you tell me a story about when we were changing the tape about a play you’d gone to in high school, one of those plays on Broadway. One with Pearl Bailey.

Judge Cordell: Right. So if we talk about molds that are kind of, really significant points, moments in your life. Going to see Pearl Bailey, Cab Calloway, in the first all Black Broadway production. Period this was it. Right and this was Hello Dolly. So this was a big deal. And particularly in the Black community. My God. All these Black performers and they’re doing Hello Dolly in New York. So, of course, we went. And we was my mother, my cousin Renee who is the
same as Denise, about two years younger than I, my Aunt LaDoris, and I think it was a whole group that went on a bus. It was a bus trip up. And fortunately the seats that Renee and I, and my mother, it was all pretty close up. It was, as you look at the stage we were sitting on the left, so it would be stage right if you’re up on the stage. So in preparation for this, I was so excited about going and this would have been 1967, I was in high school. I don’t know if I was in college yet so either it was 68, 69 which I would have been in college, so I was somewhere around there. But what was significant this was Black Pride. And I had the afro and this was so important. So, in order to, I just felt that I couldn’t just go up there and sit. I had to do something more to let these folks know that what they were doing was just terrific. So what’s nice about drycleaners is that my father had, part of what he did was do people’s shirts. Okay, when he did the shirts, we sent them to a laundry, then we’d get them ready. They would wrapped in this brown paper. And this brown paper is on this huge roll at the shop. I got this idea. So my father said go for it. I wanted to make a big sign. So I got this big roll, its huge. It’s not connected to a table. And I pulled down a sheet that was six feet. And it was maybe two feet wide. And I cut it off and then I got some paint. I like to do artwork, I grew up drawing cartoons and all kinds of stuff and I wrote Black and Beautiful. And I did it. I got some poster paint and I did the letters in black and I outlined them in whatever colors I can’t remember. It was gorgeous. And I let dry, this was a major project. And then I told my mother what I want to do is when they’re finished the show and they’re taking their bows. I want us to stand up and hold the sign. My mother said I’m not going to hold it up. But my cousin Renee said yeah, we can do that. So I’m set. I had this sign. I rolled it up and nobody on the bus knew what was going on. My Aunt LaDoris, nobody. So we go to see Hello Dolly and got great seats. Didn’t know what my seats were going to be, but fortunately we were up close enough so it was great. So it was great. Pearl Bailey, Cab Calloway and all these young Black dancers and singers. It was great. So they’re taking their bows now, the audience is on their feet. The audience is primarily White. But you know, we’re there, we’re there. And so they’re taking their bows and encores and the orchestra is playing and everybody is standing up in audience and I said to Renee, now let’s go. Pearl Bailey was taking her bows, she had come over to stage right which was directly right in front of us and was taking her bows. I said, let’s go. So we stood up and we held up the sign so that the people on the stage, the actors and actresses could see it. And it was big. People behind us couldn’t tell what it was, but the people behind us knew it and thought it was great because all the people on the stage started applauding and giving the Black Power sign and just clapping and pointed at us and I felt just so terrific. So Pearl Bailey sees the sign and she motions for me to bring the sign up to her. This is amazing. So I get the sign from Renee, the end of it, and I kind of fold up quickly cause the music playing, everyone is standing up applauding and I walk down the aisle because I pretty close and I hand it up. Somebody passes it up to her. And Pearl Bailey takes the sign and she rips it to shreds. Just tears it up. And there was just complete silence in the theater. So the orchestra stops, the conductor is looking, the people on the stage are looking
like what’s going on. I’m standing there looking what, Renee’s next to me. People in the audience, everybody. And then there’s this voice and its Pearl Bailey and she points to me and says don’t bring that trash into my theater. You see me after the show. And she just stormed off with the sign. Just stormed off the stage. So I think at that point, now I’m devastated. I’m humiliated. I just had Pearl Bailey yell at me and said what I thought it was trash. I’m sure I had tears. I’m sure. I’m standing there. And I’m getting these very mean looks from people in the audience. Wow, screwed this up. This was a really good experience. And now, my mother and my Aunt LaDoris, oh we’re going back stage. I just want to get out of there. Oh no, no, no, we’re going back stage because this is wrong. Okay the four of us, Renee, my Aunt LaDoris, my mother and I, we go back stage. And as we’re walking back stage, I’m passing all these actors and they’re saying things like, I’m really sorry, what you did was really good, I really appreciate it. And then Cab Calloway comes through and says to me, I really appreciate it, what you did was a good thing, just don’t pay any attention to her. This is what I’m hearing so at least I’m feeling a little bit better. So we get to the door and it’s Pearl Bailey’s dressing room. I knock on the door. I don’t know if I knocked but one of us did. She says come in, so in we go. Well, I go in and we spent about, my guess is about 10 minutes in there with Pearl Bailey. She’s sitting down at her dressing table and there’s a big mirror. Lights around it, standard kind of thing that you see actresses in front of. And there’s my sign and its over in the corner. All balled up over the in the corner. Okay. And then Pearl Bailey starts talking. And she talks for about 10 minutes. I don’t even get a word in. Except I remember saying one thing to her. But she starts to lecture. I’m not Black, I’m not the color if this, and she pointed to something black. And I remember I said that’s not what this means. This is about a state of mind, it’s about a whole history of, I don’t want to hear that, so I knew I wasn’t getting anywhere. So I’m thinking I should go. But no, she kept talking. And she talked and then it got very personal and bizarre. As far as I’m concerned because she started talking about everybody in the whole group here, the actors they didn’t like her and they were saying mean things about her, and slipping these anonymous notes under her door and she then pulled open a drawer and she said, look what I have to do before I can get on stage. And I’m looking and there’s hypodermic needles in it. Oh my God, what is going on. So we ended up leaving shortly thereafter and you would think that Pearl Bailey was my best friend because she ends up giving me a book, her autobiography, and she signs it. She gives it to me. And this is totally bizarre. I have the book, I still have it, if anybody doubts me, I’m willing to produce it. And off we went. So there you go, we get back on the bus, everybody staring at me, you really messed up. And I’m thinking you all just don’t know. You all don’t get it. So it’s real interesting. She kept that sign. You would think if she didn’t want that trash in her theater, she could have, but she kept it. So important moment of my life. Oh yes. About speaking up. About having people not look kindly about what it is you do, even though you think you’re doing the right thing. I still believe I did the right thing. And I also watched the strength of my mother and my Aunt
LaDoris and said, oh no, we’re going to deal with this. We don’t run from anything, particularly if you’ve done nothing wrong. So little lessons here and there. Now that was one for me.

Dr. Keller: You didn’t tell the people on the bus what happened.

Judge Cordell: Oh I think I kept quiet and kept my head down. I just wanted to get home.

Dr. Keller: We got sidetracked. I’m sorry. You were telling me at Antioch you became a theater major after your unfortunate Mexican experience. Did you worry about making money at some point?

Judge Cordell: I did. When I got to my senior year. And so, what am I’m going to do. I loved the theater in that I performed in some plays. But I also directed, as a senior project, you had to find a play, direct it, find the actors, and then direct it. I had to build the set, do all the lighting, and I ended up doing a play by his name then was LeRoi Jones. It’s a one act that takes place on a subway car. So I had to build a subway car. Which meant I went to a place where they had old discarded school busses and actually got poles and seats. Actually brought them back. It was extraordinary. Then had to have sound effects. I did all this. I designed the lighting. And then it has to be performed for the public. And for the life of me, I can’t remember the name of the play but I’ll Google it and find it. So I loved it. I really enjoyed it. But I am also not one of those, actors, you have to be uninhibited completely. You have to be able to take your clothes off on stage. That’s not me. That’s not what I do. I can be outrageous to some extent. But not that. Particularly with my body because I’m such just a flat chested, pathetic thing growing up and I had all these kind of issues of image. So that wasn’t going to be me. So I really had to do some thinking. What am I’m going to do. And so I get this thing, I’m ruling out. Let’s rule out things. There’s no way math, science, it just never grabbed me. And so, I’m ruling things out and so then I came upon the law. Because there was a business law class. And somebody at Antioch, some professor, you know what why don’t you try looking at this because I knew I wasn’t going to make it in theatre. That was not gonna be me. So I took this business law class and I liked it. It made sense to me. I kind of got it, sort of, and I decided, well, I ruled out stuff. I have no idea what’s ahead but I think, we’re just going to go in direction of the law and pray that something strikes my fancy. So that’s how that went because I needed something, a skill, a profession, so much so that I would not be dependent on anybody. That was my big thing. No way was I going to wait for somebody to come around and support me. I had to be able to take care of myself.

Dr. Keller: So we skipped ahead to kind of the end of college which I didn’t mean to do. I was just curious. Your parents didn’t say, you’re a theatre major, what do you think
Judge Cordell: Not at all. Not at all. No they were really fine with whatever I did. But Mother was not fine with my going to Mississippi and she told me later, she was terrified the whole time I was done there. What are doing. I remember at one point I’d never picked cotton but that was the big thing. And I went out in the cotton field when I was done there. And oh my God, I tried to pick some cotton. No, I would not have made it as a slave. Okay. I would have been one of the house slaves. But I did pick a cotton boll and put it in a little piece of brown paper and I sent it to my parents. Well my mother got this thing and she thought that somebody had sent a finger or something of mine. She was terrified. And I get it, I don’t think, she is not particularly histrionic. But this is back in the 60’s and she gets this little brown wrapped paper coming up from Mississippi. Right. So that wasn’t funny for her. I thought, well, here’s a cotton boll. So no, but in the main, always supportive.

Dr. Keller: When you got back from Mexico.

Judge Cordell: I went to an experimental school in Philadelphia for boys, troubled boys and I ended up being a teacher there. And it was just a whole new way of dealing with young males, and they were in the main all Black if I remember. And a new way of teaching in a classroom. It was really kind of, if you asked me what was that approach. I couldn’t tell you today. But one of the things that came out of it for me was that I learned photography because this school had darkrooms for these kids. And I said well, hey, let me go learn this. Darkrooms are now antiquated because we have digital now. But back then, I really got into photography and learned how to work in a darkroom. Another co-op job I had was a substitute teacher in the public school system in Dayton. That was an experience. Because this was the city, urban, kids out of control, mostly Black. These were all Black schools to which I was sent and oh my goodness, I had a desk thrown at me one day. And I went in there looking probably, when I went to college I went 88 pounds. I’m tall, I’m 5’7 1/2 and I weighed 88 pounds. I was skinny, pathetic thing as I told you. I ended up going to teach. I could be one of these kids here and I’m trying to get respect from them. It was very interesting. And I eventually did okay. But there were some very rough days. And one of them, this kid was just totally out of control. There was an issue and he picked up a desk and threw it at me. Crazy. So I did all kind of teaching. Music, and other subjects, whatever I was called on to do because then they paid you per day substitute teaching. So actually made, it was pretty decent while I was doing that. I think that may have been the extent of my co-ops.

Dr. Keller: You graduated in 4 years. If I remember correctly, about Antioch, most people think 5 years.

Judge Cordell: It’s usually a 5 year program. But I didn’t have the money for 5 years.

Dr. Keller: So you took fewer co-ops.
Judge Cordell: Yeah.

Dr. Keller: So you got a BA.

Judge Cordell: Yes I did in drama and speech. Pretty useless, pretty useless right?

Dr. Keller: Your social life? At Antioch?

Judge Cordell: Well I was there during the height of bringing in Black students. And, hold on one second.

Dr. Keller: So your social life at Antioch. Pretty much with the Black kids?

Judge Cordell: Oh yeah. This was Black Power. I mean we hung out. I didn't, I wasn’t a hater but I got into karate very heavily. I earned a couple of belts. I could break boards, all this stuff. This was all part of Black community self sufficient, take care of our own kind of thing. So I spent the first couple of years. That was it. And I ended up meeting my husband to-be. And he was a student at a nearby college where Roxanna had been at college because we just missed each other at Central State University and he was there because he was there on a tennis scholarship. He was a tennis pro. And also grew up in Yellow Springs, Ohio, which was Antioch and his parents’ home, his family home was right behind the college. So I ended up meeting him there and eventually he became my husband.

Dr. Keller: But he wasn’t a student. He was a student at Central State. So how did you meet him.

Judge Cordell: Cause he hung out Antioch. I didn't go far. I was pretty much on the campus other than go away for the co-ops. Some of the Central State students would come over the Antioch and hang out because there was a lot of smoking of weed and all that stuff going on at Antioch. And students would all come over there. It was more of hang loose place. That’s Antioch.

Dr. Keller: So how serious was your relationship with Gary while you were

Judge Cordell: His first name was Gary as you pointed out. Gary Cordell. And we eventually lived together for a couple of years.

Dr. Keller: While you were at Antioch?

Judge Cordell: Yeah. Yeah. And then, we lived off campus, we had an apartment. Then after my first year of law school, we got married. And he came out to

Dr. Keller: So you graduate and decide business law, not bad.
Judge Cordell: Right.

Dr. Keller: Did you apply to law schools from college.

Judge Cordell: Absolutely. My last year. At the beginning of my last year, that's when you had to get these applications in.

Dr. Keller: Right.

Judge Cordell: So I had to take the LSAT. And then apply to law schools. And I didn't, I really didn't know about law schools at all. So I applied to, what the heck, I applied to all the biggies. Harvard, Yale, maybe Chicago. And then, I said, I need a backup, I applied to the University of Cincinnati. Right there in Ohio. Right. And Gary suggested. He had been on the West Coast because he was going to join the Peace Corps at one point. And he did some training in San Francisco. But he decided not to do that. And he said, I heard of this school called Stanford. And I admit, I had not heard of it. I didn't know anything on the West Coast. So why don't you apply to that because we may want to end up on the West Coast. Oh what the heck. Well I really didn't know too much about but, of course, I learned later it was a good school. It wasn't as big then when I applied then when I applied then as it has become now. But good school. So I applied there as well.

Dr. Keller: And, what happened?

Judge Cordell: Let's see, I didn't get into any of the schools to which I applied. With the exception I did get on a waiting list at University of Cincinnati. So at that point, all the Ivy's were just like we don't, no, no, just not. And I, somehow, I learned that the problem was that I had gone to Antioch. I had no grades. You remember I said, it's pass, fail. They said, we're not taking you in. Everybody else has grades. We have something on which to measure. What they did do at Antioch, the professors wrote evaluations on every class and on every student but that wasn't what these schools wanted. So fearing that I wasn't going to get in anywhere, not even into Cincinnati, I remember, I think I called out to Stanford because that was the last one and spoke to someone who I later came to know named Thelton Henderson and he was the person who was the assistant dean doing admissions there. I didn't know he was. A nice person. And basically plead my case and said you know Antioch doesn't have grades and I'm been a good student, politely, long story short, I got a letter admitting me into Stanford Law School. Thanks to Thelton Henderson. Also followed up by a phone call imploring me to come. What I later learned from Thelton. I was the first Antiochian to be admitted to Stanford Law School, so they took a chance in bringing me there. And subsequently they have admitted, they did admit other Antiochians. I remember one specifically John Preskill who was an Antiochian. And he was admitted the law school there. So, the next adventure
began which was leaving the Midwest and going all out to the West Coast, where I’d never before been never imagined I’d be to go to Stanford Law School.

Dr. Keller: So this was 1971. There was no intervening time. You went straight from Antioch.

Judge Cordell: That’s it, let’s get it done. More debt.

Dr. Keller: What was that like?

Judge Cordell: I was terrified. I came out by myself. I remember taking from the airport, I guess I had a cab and just remember coming onto the campus. I hadn’t done my homework. I didn’t know what this place looked like. All I saw were these palm trees. What the heck. I remember going down Palm Drive, which was lined with palm trees. And there’s this big oval and saying to the cab person, just let me out here. And I got out and had my suitcase, whatever else. I think the very first place I went before I even went to my dorm was to find Thelton Henderson. And I found him. I remember knocking on the door. And I see this guy. Oh, it’s a brother. This is a black guy. So Thelton’s there and I introduce myself. He’s sitting there very calmly and smiling. And I think he must have thought I was totally insane because I just said, I’m so appreciative you admitted me and I’m going to really work hard and I’m not going to disappoint you and I’m really going to do this and he said okay, all righty then, okay. So that’s how it started and then I made my way to my dorm at Caruthers Hall and then it was truly culture shock being at Stanford. There was another Black woman in my class but she dropped out, took a leave the second year. She came back. She did graduate but I ended up being by myself being the only Black woman in my class.

Dr. Keller: Were there Black males?

Judge Cordell: There were Black males. There were 7 maybe, 6 or 7 and there were a group of Latinos. So Thelton this was because of Thelton. Thelton had really pushed to bring in students of color because the first Black graduate from Stanford first ever was 1968, Sally Ann Peyton. First ever. And the first ever Latino was 1969 graduated. So that’s the history. So then I show up with our group in 71 that’s because they’d brought Thelton Henderson in as the Assistant Dean to deal with this. We had to represent, we had to show to fellow students some of whom made it quite clear that they didn’t think we deserved to be there. I heard comments and to professors who’d never before at this law school taught any students of color. We had to represent and show we are legitimately here. Even though a part of me didn’t even believe it. A part of me was scared to death and believed that aw shoot, I’m in over my head. Is this right, affirmative action, that whole thing. I was kind of even buying into that. And I think some of my classmates quietly may have too but we didn’t talk about it. So I would
always put on the front that I’m here, I can do this work terrified that I couldn’t. But hey, that’s the way it goes, when you’re the first ones up.

Dr. Keller: So did the Black men include in their ranks? Did you feel supported by them?

Judge Cordell: Absolutely, absolutely. And the Latinos. We formed a very nice group of people. I mean there’s always, in some groups, folks who don’t want to belong, identify with being Black. You always have one or two of those. But in the main, it was a group who was very supportive. One of things I ended doing though at Stanford. I told you I like to draw cartoons. And there was a student-run law school newspaper and I would sit in class and I would do these doodles and draw cartoons of some of the professors. Some of my classmates, somebody saw them and said this would really be good in the newspaper. So I ended up actually having a regular cartoon series in the Stanford law school newspaper where I lampooned teachers and I drew them and they got a lot of attention so much so that at one point, I guess this is going into my third year, last year at law school, some students, all of whom were White and I was friendly with everybody came and said we want to run to be the president and vice-president, basically a slate and it was a competitive thing and would you be on the slate? I said, oh well, why not, what the heck. We ran and we had a campaign and we ran on the slate and I’m sure my cartoons actually helped bring my name to the attention of the student body, so after the election, our slate lost except for me. So I

Dr. Keller: What was your position?

Judge Cordell: I don’t even remember. So anyway yeah.

Dr. Keller: You always got As. Did you do as well as at Antioch.

Judge Cordell: At Antioch. I don’t know. I didn’t get grades, but I was fine. I did what I was supposed to do. And at Stanford, no, I just got the shock of my life. You don’t give me a B first of all. And I was lucky I got Cs at Stanford. What the heck and part of this was looking back. There’s a certain, you have to understand how to write like a lawyer. When you write these exams and I, no one was there to tell me how to do this, and there were nobody in my family beforehand who’d been a lawyer to do this. So it really took me a year, two, dang that’s how we do this, to really get on it. So Cs, me? And I had to adjust, and I did better, particularly the last year I was getting it.

Dr. Keller: There was nobody assigned to help?

Judge Cordell: Yes there were, I am sure there were tutors there. But I was busy. And the other reason my grades suffered somewhat my first year is that was the year that Angela Davis was put on trial down here in San Jose, right near.
Dr. Keller: How far was that from Stanford

Judge Cordell: Stanford to San Jose takes 18 minutes. So she was on trial and the trial had been moved from Marin County up north of San Francisco to San Jose and a big trial. This was George Jackson and the murder of a judge, an attempted escape, and she was a fugitive. She was finally caught and put on trial. And they were looking at the death penalty for her. It was a capital case. And I just said, hey this is in my backyard, and I’m not going to have part of this? No, I have to. So I just on my own I went down to the trial and thereafter I met some of the lawyers, one of whom was Howard Moore, Macon civil rights attorney, and I want to help. And he said who are you and I said I’m a first year student at Stanford. So I ended up meeting regularly whenever I could with the lawyers and Angela Davis and they assigned me, what can I do, a first year, I don’t know any of this stuff. But they assigned me to putting together every single, this is before the Internet now, every kind of newspaper article, anything that came out about the case. We had volumes and it was my job to really make the record on this. This is how I spent my time and then I would go to court. My afro was as big as Angela’s just so you need to know, so when I would go to court they would confiscate at that time, I had these afro picks and you could not take a pick into court, and everybody with these big afros were all filing into San Jose court. It was so interesting because I ended up presiding in that very courtroom she was tried. So I got a chance to watch her and watch her do voir dire in her own trial. She participated as an attorney in the case and, of course, she was acquitted. It was an amazing experience. So yeah, I had a bit of a diversion during my first year because I was involved in that trial.

Dr. Keller: And you also had a boyfriend back East.

Judge Cordell: Yeah, we were engaged. I mean I had an engagement ring. And so, that was my first year. So at the end of the first year, I go back East to get married and then we both came out and lived out here ever since.

Dr. Keller: So, more about the culture shock for a second. You said you stayed fairly segregated at Antioch with Black students.

Judge Cordell: Right, right.

Dr. Keller: How about when you got to Stanford.

Judge Cordell: First of all there was only a handful of Black students and everybody was kind of spread out. So, no, I was living in the dorm. I had a single room, most of us did. The law students did. No everybody living there, and I’m the only Black woman and somehow I got to know my classmates and most of them were White.

Dr. Keller: Was that a pretty decent experience?
Judge Cordell: It was fine. It was very good actually. And some of them are still. I didn’t have any close, close friends but some of them. I still communicate. It’s all good.

Dr. Keller: So then you got married. And moved out of the dorms I presume.

Judge Cordell: Yes. We had an apartment in Palo Alto.

Dr. Keller: And continued with laws school.

Judge Cordell: Had a bicycle when I went back to school. Short on cash. Always short on cash. So I took a job at Macy’s and I worked at Macy’s on weekends and on holidays. Holiday’s you made double time, I guess time and a half, and I got a 20 percent on clothing there. So that was fine. I rode my bike and did what I needed to do and did my work so well at Macy’s when it was time for me to move on I was asked whether I would like to join their management program at Macy’s. I’m looking at them. Now I told you I’m in law school but so be it. But the hard part was occasionally Stanford law students would come to Macy’s and here I am behind the register. Didn’t make me happy. Didn’t make my happy. But it’s about for me, keep your eye on the prize. That’s what I kept telling myself. You can get through this and move on.

Dr. Keller: Were you thinking at this point about what kind of law you wanted to practice.

Judge Cordell: By the second year. As a first year, I had no clue, because first year you had basic courses and I’m still trying to understand how to do this analysis, and think like a lawyer. The second year, everything changed. Game changer. That was because of Michael Wald. And Michael Wald, professor at the law school taught juvenile law. That was his area of expertise. He was amazing but he also had a clinical program so meaning, you actually go to court, so I decided let me try that. Courtroom, whatever, I’d never been in a courtroom. So I joined the clinical program. Michael accepted me into his class and boy did that change everything cause I got to go to court and represent with him supervising these juveniles. And I found, this is little theater, everything comes into play. Now I’m in court, I’m on stage. And in juvenile court there’s no jury, it’s just the judge so I had to persuade the judge to my way of thinking about my client and another thing I found out, I could never be a prosecutor. I cannot, it’s just not about that for me. Some people, it’s their natural inclination. My natural inclination was to defend people, to represent the underdog. It’s just who I am period. It’s probably not hard to figure that one out. I mean, the whole history, Black folks being out and under and needing people to be there for us. So I wasn’t about to try to punish people. That was not my issue. I was also not naïve. I did not think anybody who was representing were golden. No, a lot of them were criminals. But the point, it’s up to the state to prove the case and in order to make the state do that you’d
better have a good defense. That's what it was about for me. So then it changed. Because then I got in a courtroom and I loved it. The adrenaline flow. And I had very interesting experiences in court as a law student that really define for me where I was headed. What I was going to do.

Dr. Keller: Can you remember a particular.

Judge Cordell: I can tell you one case in particular. And my client's name was Gwen, Gwendolyn. I blanking on the last name, it will come to me. She was 15 and she was charged, I don't know if it was a drug charge. I think it was and I was, I got her case. So I had the first type of detention hearing in juvenile court, it's a hearing to sort out whether the person should stay in the detention hall or be able to go home. So with Michael's guidance I was, I had this detention hearing and I was able to get her out. And how did I do that? Well Gwen, the Gwen that I saw and first met in the juvenile hall did not look like the Gwen that we eventually brought into court. Because I had her change from looking like, she really looked like a slut, she looked like a prostitute quite frankly and she was only 15. But that's what she was doing. And when I finished with her she looked like she was 12. The hair and everything changed. Went in with the judge and I had her family members in and allowed her to go home. Then we had the main case to deal with. And in juvenile court if you can't prove didn't, then you better build up for a disposition which really is the moral equivalent of sentencing in adult court. So I put on a very good dispositional hearing and Gwen went home. Basically she didn't have more time. And really had a heart-to-heart talk with her, stop doing all this stuff and hanging around with the wrong people and get back to school. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. All right the case is done. That summer I go back to Ardmore. I was in Ardmore, maybe it was preparing to get married there. This would have been afterwards. And I'm back home. I get a phone call from Michael Wald. Michael, why are you calling me. He said I just wanted to tell you something. And what he told me just floored me. And he told me that Gwen was dead. And he actually said to me, you need to sit down, I want you to sit down before I tell you. He told me. What happened she went back into the life and she was with her pimp who was also a drug dealer and it was a drug deal gone bad and the folks who were very upset about the drug not getting what they wanted or should have gotten came to where this drug dealer was, Gwen happened to be there. Guns were pulled out. She screamed. She got under the couch or the bed and was hiding there and then they killed her too. And so that was it. I'm sitting down listening to this and I realize oh my God, and then I started feeling very guilty. Well you know, if I hadn't been so darn good and really worked to get her out to do what she wanted, she'd maybe still be in and maybe gotten help for her. And Michael had to talk to me, no, no, no. Your job as a defense attorney is to advocate for you client and you do what your client wants. If you client wanted to stay in and then your client would have told you. That's not your job. And you don't beat yourself up on what people choose to do thereafter. So very significant but brought home to me the importance of clinical education. And a
tremendous supporter of clinical education in law school, whatever the subject may be. Have to get some real world experience while you’re still in that cocoon.

Dr. Keller: Sounds like at that time if we had talked then, you would have said yeah, I want to be a defense attorney.

Judge Cordell: Yes, no question. And I knew this was my call. I absolutely. I like criminal law. There something about human beings and human nature and why people do these crazy awful things. Fascinates me. And then being able to go in and present a case and of course, it gets even more complex when you’re in front of a jury. But that didn’t happen for me until. In fact it happened right out of law school. As soon as I graduated, I had my first jury trial.

Dr. Keller: You know we talked about your being African-American and how that influenced a lot of life. But we haven’t looked at much is being a woman. When you were in law school was percentage of your classmates were women.

Judge Cordell: I can’t give you the number but it was a low percentage. Nothing like what it is now where women outnumber men in law school. It was a small percentage.

Dr. Keller: And how about faculty.

Judge Cordell: Faculty, I think there were no women except until Barbara Babcock came. When she came to Stanford, I was either in my second year or third year. I think it was my third year and I had my first female law professor and that was Barbara Babcock and to this day she’s friend, mentor. She was a tremendous influence on my life. She taught a number of things. Her big area for a while was civil procedure. She’s actually co-author of the book on civil procedure, one of the books. At the time it was something to do, it may have been, sex discrimination, blah, blah, blah. Something like that. I can’t quite remember, I’ll have to kind of dig that up, or ask her.

Dr. Keller: Was that a big deal that she was a woman.

Judge Cordell: Oh God this was huge. I mean think about it, this was 1973. And they’d never had a woman. Times were changing. They were changing and I’m glad I got to be a part of that of that change. Yeah, it was a big deal.

Dr. Keller: So now you’re finishing law school.

Judge Cordell: And I’m married.

Dr. Keller: And you’re married. You don’t have any kids yet do you?

Judge Cordell: No.
Dr. Keller: So the next hurdle is probably going to be the bar exam.

Judge Cordell: Oh yeah.

Dr. Keller: And making some money too.

Judge Cordell: That’s correct.

Dr. Keller: So you graduate, now what.

Judge Cordell: Before I graduated I had a job. I had applied for. Let me go back a little bit. I had looked for a job and actually had some job interviews with some major law firms, because that’s the big thing. Going with the big firms. O’Melveny and Myers, they don’t exist under that name today, I think it’s a different name kind of thing. Firms like that. So I interviewed and I got not one job offer. Not one. And so feeling a little desperate and my classmates are getting jobs. They’re getting jobs. You know I’m interviewing with a big afro. You got to picture all this. This is the 70s, Stanford Law, only Black woman in the class, big afro and I’m not looking like, I’m not looking the part. I don’t think about that. This is me, it’s who I am. But I’m not getting any job offers and I’m not saying it’s because of how I looked but I think it’s a safe factor.

Dr. Keller: Did anybody ever give you any feedback?

Judge Cordell: Uh, no. So I’m feeling desperate. I know I probably may have talked to Michael Wald, and to Barbara, and I talked to them. I think they were responsible, somebody there was responsible for getting me an interview with one of the partners. I think it was O’Melveny and Myers. So I went up to San Francisco very excited. I had my resume. They were about to grab me from Stanford. And basically that interview was a bust and I was told by this person, a male, an older White male that, he said, we’re just not going to hire a Black woman. We’re not ready to do that, that’s not gonna happen. And I was totally shocked, but that’s what I was told. That’s not gonna happen. Now I didn’t have the sense then to file a lawsuit but I left devastated and I still have to find, I mean my whole purpose going to law school was, I had to be independent and make a living and support myself. So, the next thing that I did was I applied for and I received an Earl Warren Fellowship. What happens is that earlier, I got an Earl Warren Fellowship and basically, the Earl Warren Fellowship named after Earl Warren and it was sponsored by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund headquartered in New York. They had an office in San Francisco. And I was able to persuade the powers that be that they should give me a Fellowship. Their Fellowships before this had always been given to lawyers, Black lawyers who go out of law school to the South. And to open a law practice where there had never been before a law office. And they had never been any on the West Coast. But I made the argument that East Palo Alto which is across the freeway
from Stanford and Palo Alto, predominately a Black and Brown community with low income, with very few, with hardly any tax base at the time and no lawyers. In fact the only lawyer that had ever been there was Thelton Henderson when he was in a legal aid office that used to be there. But there had never been a lawyer with an office there in private practice. And I persuaded the Earl Warren Fellowship folks to give me a Fellowship that would permit me to open a law practice in East Palo Alto and they said okay. So I was given 4 years, a four-year fellowship and with a declining stipend. So the first year was $11,000, the next year $9,000, the next year $7,000, then $5,000. They also had some money put in to allow me to put in a small law library. But I had to find a place to be. And where was I going to put this law practice. So that was my next step. I had to find a place in East Palo Alto in which to open up a law practice and so I could do this.

Dr. Keller: Didn’t you mention something about the Legal Defense Fund, that you worked up there at some point.

Judge Cordell: Right. So, thank you for reminding me. On my, during my last year at, let’s take that back. No I got a job, part of this Fellowship was to work for a year at the Legal Defense Fund. So I worked at the Legal Defense Fund.

Judge Cordell: I going to stop the tape because I want to get the chronology right. So I wasn’t able to get a job and for whatever reason. And then I became aware, as I told you of this Earl Warren Fellowship, and was able to persuade them to give me to allow me to go into East Palo Alto. So I was the first person to get an Earl Warren Fellowship to be on the West Coast. So part of this Fellowship was a declining stipend but the first year before the stipend, before I’m in the community, because I had to get everything set up, I spent a year working at the Legal Defense Fund. And they had an office in San Francisco, so I was there and some of the lawyers I remember was William Hickman, a fantastic lawyer, William Bennett Turner, Bill Turner, he was there and the idea is to take that year to get some learning about the law, litigation, whatever I was going to be doing. So I was there after graduating from law school and studied for the Bar, right and then started my work there. So I must have started there in late summer, early fall, because the Bar exam was in July. Then it’s off to start being in training. Okay.

Dr. Keller: So you spent a year working in San Francisco.

Judge Cordell: Right.


Judge Cordell: I graduated in 74 and the exams come out just before Thanksgiving, the results. So I was in San Francisco, Bar results come out and another game changer for
me. Because I didn’t pass the Bar. I did not pass the Bar exam.

Dr. Keller: Is the first time you failed.

Judge Cordell: The first time I can remember failing at something really. And this was huge. This was a huge blow. One to the ego, two, I really had studied very hard, three I can’t do the Fellowship, I can’t have a job unless I have a license to practice law. So I’m just put out by all of this and I have to figure out what I’m going to do and I really don’t have a choice. I have to pass the Bar exam. And I had taken the bar courses everyone else took. I remember taking the classes at Stanford and to prepare for the Bar exam and I just didn’t pass. I had taken the Bar in San Francisco. It was at the Sheraton Palace Hotel. So the worst feeling, the very worst is getting a letter that says you didn’t pass. The second worst feeling is going to work the following week and having to look at people who said I’m so sorry, and eyes cast down and feeling terrible. And I got the word basically if I didn’t pass the Bar, next time around, there’s go the Fellowship and I just have to figure out what to do. I didn’t panic, I just bore down, I knew what I had to do. And at this time, I had been playing tennis off and on and one of the things I learned in tennis is never change a winning game, always change a losing game. This was a losing game. I had just lost big time. So I had to do things differently and I didn’t have the money to take another big course. So I decided to just basically get the exam. It turned out I passed the multi-state. That wasn’t a problem. I had not passed on the essays. So I got all my essays. That’s the way you do it. Go and find out how I did, what did I write. And I didn’t even remember what I wrote. I’m kind of traumatized when I was taking this exam anyway. It’s just a scary experience period. But I did, then I found a former Bar grader and had that person sit down with me and just kind of go over my essays. And he actually suggested that I ask the Bar, write them and appeal it, asking them to reconsider. Because I was 1.3 percentage points from passing. And I don’t know what that percentage did in total points but he said this is just ridiculously close. Maybe if they read it again they would find sufficient points to get you over. So I asked them to do that, they said nope, you still have to take it. And back then if you didn’t pass the Bar you had to take both sections over again. Even if you passed one. I don’t think that’s the case today. So I had to take the multi-state and I had to take all the essay. So I changed my game. And what I did was, I got the Legal Defense Fund to give me from November after Thanksgiving, so all of December and all of January and part of February to just study, full time and take the Bar exam in February. So I set up a regimen. I’d get up every day. I’d get on my bike and ride up to the downtown library in Palo Alto and I’d have my lunch which was always peanut butter and jelly and some low-fat milk. And I would just study from 9 o’clock to 5 o’clock. Take my little break for lunch and did that 5 days a week. Then gave myself a break on Saturday and studied Sunday night. And I did this the last part of November, December, January and then toward the end. So at the end I ended up just doing practice Bar exam questions under time. Just as many as I could write. And then further change of game, I went to Los Angeles
and took the exam down there. Didn’t know anybody and I felt good after the first day. Back to work at the Legal Defense Fund, bar results come out and back then there was no Internet thing going on so I called and I was told that I passed. And that was just an amazing feeling.

Dr. Keller: Did you have a celebration.

Judge Cordell: Well no, I don’t think I celebrated. At the time, I was pregnant. So here we go. I just, I had the clock running, and having babies, and when your body can do all this and I guess at the time I was 25 so I’m married, I got have a kid if I want to do this. And I knew I had to pass and I passed. So there you go. It was just a tremendous feeling to know that.

Dr. Keller: Your husband must have been working at the time.

Judge Cordell: Off and on.

Dr. Keller: You said he was a tennis pro.

Judge Cordell: So he had a 9 to 5 job and then also spent a lot of time playing tennis, teaching tennis. That was his first love. His employment was not particularly steady. He would prefer to be out playing tennis. Just made it very hard on me because you can’t do that if you’re bringing children into the world and want to have some savings and run a household. It was not a particularly happy time for me but it was which I just bore down because I had so much I wanted to do and had to do.

Dr. Keller: So let me just get the chronology, you graduate from Stanford in June, you start working at the Legal Defense Fund, you find out you flunked the Bar in November of that year, you take it again in February, and when do you find out.

Judge Cordell: Find out in July.

Dr. Keller: At what point in all this do you open

Judge Cordell: My law practice. So we’re talking 74 when I took the exam first time and then second time I took it in 74 but found I passed in 75, so I get sworn into the Bar went up to the Federal court and got sworn and, so then, it’s time for me now to start my Fellowship to be out in the community. So I have to find a place to be, East Palo Alto had never had a lawyer, other than that little legal aid office that no longer existed. That was all gone. So I’m going to make this a short story. But basically I had to find a location and then I had to buy an office, I had to figure out how to do this, I found an abandoned house on a large parking lot on a corner of University Avenue and Weeks Avenue in East Palo Alto. And it was really a crack house because if you walked up there during the day or night, you would see these hypodermic needles just laying out in the yard. And this is
before the Aids epidemic really, people knew about Aids. So I found a real estate person there and said this is what I want to do and he said okay. This could happen. It would have to all be remodeled but it would have sufficient space. You had to have some vision. It was a pretty big-sized house. So I ended up getting a loan, remember I got to pay off my Antioch school loan, my Stanford school loan, and now I have to go get a mortgage because the only way I can open up this practice is to buy this building. So I do that. I got a mortgage with, trying to think, either Wells Fargo or Bank of America, one of the two. Now I’m in big debt because now I have to pay off this mortgage right and this means I have to get this law practice going. So I had someone in the East Palo Alto community come in and did the remodel and the place looked terrific. It just looked terrific. It had waiting room into the lobby area which was a lobby area, it had a fireplace and a desk. And a nice kitchen area. And I ended up actually living there. So the front of it had a library, two offices, three offices, a conference room and then I still had room for two bedrooms and it had 2 1/2 bathrooms. It was an amazing place to get. And the parking lot, the whole bit. So I basically set up shop. There’s a little back story and if you want to hear it, if not, then don’t worry about but in order to buy the building, there was a lien on it, and the lien was on it because it had been used for bail for Huey Newton who had fled the country and was living in Cuba. So I couldn’t get the house because Huey wasn’t going to come back here so I could get the lien off the house. So there were all these negotiations that went on. Finally I was able to get the lien off. I was able to buy the house. There were all these weird connections. Huey Newton. So I was going to open up my law practice in 1976. So I was with a lawyer’s office. I rented an office space with a lawyer named Jim Danaher who died a couple of years ago. Who said yeah, you can come be a lawyer here. You can set up your own practice and I’ll even give you some cases. It was just amazing and that’s how I really got started. Then once the building was ready, in 1976. This was in January or so. My first daughter, Sharron, was born in October 75. So I had to have a caesarean section. Didn’t know until the last minute. So I delivered in October and in January I began my law practice on my own in East Palo Alto. And so at 3 months old, she was already with a day care mom. A small day care group of women who kept about 4 kids in East Palo Alto. So that’s the next adventure which was now starting my law practice. Scared to death once again. Scared going to law school, terrified opening up my doors to whoever would come in and running my law practice in East Palo Alto.

Dr. Keller: Do you remember your first client.
Judge Cordell: I don’t remember my first client. And I’m really sad that I don’t have any of the files from my law practice. I had them stored in a sort of a storage locker that’s not the right for it, but it was a storage area and behind the law practice and when I subsequently divorced that property went to my ex-husband and that was fine. What I didn’t know is that he just threw out all of my files. I have no record. It’s only what I can remember and I’m not a very good historian. So I don’t remember my first case. But I remember many of them. And whatever
came in the door, I took those cases. Initially I had no secretary, it was just me. Going all over the place. I had cases up in Marin. I had them in San Mateo County which is where East Palo Alto is located. Some in San Jose, some in Palo Alto, wherever because I had to pay the bill. I was doing divorces, personal injury, doing civil rights litigation. You name it, I did a lot of criminal defense work. And my reputation built because I was taking cases that some of the lawyers didn’t want but I ended up getting in the paper. I had a police brutality case which was a very big case, got a lot of publicity, and then I’d get other cases. And that’s how it worked. So some lawyers who, what I called the shit cases, that they don’t want cases, I’ll send them to Cordell because she just starting. But it didn’t matter. It didn’t matter. And eventually I hired a secretary and eventually I was able to rent office space to two lawyers so I tripled the number of lawyers in East Palo Alto, it went from zero to three for a period of time. And a secretary, and I was running myself ragged I will tell you that because I had a daughter, the husband really wasn’t pulling his fair share, then I’m just doing everything else, running this law practice, making sure I can pay the mortgage, paying my loans off, I’m doing it but at what cost. And it was really wearing me down. But had I to do it, I don’t know if I would have done it in that fashion but I love representing people, and going to court, and doing that stuff. I really really do. And I really grew up. I had to learn how to run a business. I had to learn how to manage the books, and I also had to be a mom, and also be the lawyer and be there for people. So it was an interesting time and I was young enough to be able to do it and survive it. I did that for 6 1/2 years. And I did every form of law. Which is crazy. Because there’s so many risks you take when, first, you don’t know what you are doing anyway. Fortunately I had law school professors, Michael Wald, Barbara Babcock, and I had lawyers in the community I can think of one Harry Brainman was one. Also Thelton Henderson. Folks who were there to give you some guidance and to make sure I didn’t screw up too badly. And by the time I’m doing all this Thelton was no longer an assistant dean at Stanford, he was in private practice. I think in Berkeley or San Francisco. Somewhere in the Bay area. With a firm.

Dr. Keller: Did you have trouble collecting money? You had a lot of poor clients.

Judge Cordell: On my God, yeah. I developed a thick skin because I had to learn how to say to people no, get the money up front. It was very hard to do. But people really respect you more if you say you got to pay me. Yes, I had learned a lot. And there were some cases I never paid when I should have gotten paid. But hey, it goes with the turf when you open up a law practice, particularly low-income community but that’s where I wanted to be.

Dr. Keller: You did that for 6 1/2 years

Judge Cordell: 6 1/2 years. That came to an end. So actually it was the first 4 years, so I’m going gang busters and not getting much sleep and not weighing much. I’m just trying to do all this stuff. And then I got a phone call. It was Stanford Law
School and they were looking for an assistant dean, basically Thelton had left and they looking to fill that position and asked me if I was interested and yes I was interested. Oh my God, that’s a steady job I could maybe do that, and still somehow do my law practice or not. So I interviewed for the job and did not get it. Maybe that was just meant to be. Went back to just doing my thing and I think another year went by and I got a call again. That person we hired didn’t work out. So let’s talk again. So we talked and they made an offer to me and I went then to Stanford as the assistant dean and it was 1978 so I remember I started my practice in 75, I had been with Jim Danaher and transitioned over. So in 78, pretty much in the fall is when I started as assistant dean for student affairs at Stanford and under my agreement with them I was able to keep my law practice and that was great because law students were very interested in just seeing what the practice of law was like. I could indeed involve them in some of cases. I didn’t have to depend on the law practice for the main stake of my livelihood and I was able to leave to have my second child. My second child was born in 1980 when I was still at Stanford as the assistant dean.

Dr. Keller: Now you’ve made it big, you’re an established lawyer. So how were you treated in the community? Were you treated like kind of royalty for instance. Were they any problems with the cops in East Palo Alto.

Judge Cordell: So when you say the community you mean

Dr. Keller: I mean particularly East Palo Alto but the community at large.

Judge Cordell: Certainly, I was very appreciated by people in the community in East Palo Alto. I was the only lawyer there. Had brought in two more lawyers eventually and yeah, I was getting kind of celebrity status because I was there, and I was helping people. That was what I was my main thing. And on the other side of the tracks, meaning the Palo Alto side and the more affluent side. Yes, I was being featured in the paper. So I ended up getting some recognition and doing okay. But there were still reminders that hey, you’re Black and this is a society that you just can’t take anything for granted if you’re Black. So the one big instance that stands out for me was after I had my first child, I had Sharron and that was in 1975 in October. So I’d say maybe six, seven months. Maybe even a year after that, I had the opportunity to go out one evening. It was a Saturday or Friday night and my then husband was driving, I’m sitting in the front seat and one of my friends who was an African-American male was in the back seat. And we’re going somewhere nearby. We were pulled over by the Palo Alto police and it wasn’t just one officer with a siren, it was many police cars with loud speakers and guns pointed at us ordering us to get out of our car in a major intersection in nearby Menlo Park. It’s a city just north of Palo Alto. We were ordered to stand against the wall, spreadeagle face the wall, guns at our heads just yelling, and its total humiliation and embarrassment. It’s still light out so it must have been summertime, maybe 8 in the evening. It’s was just shocking. Just shocking. Here I am, a Stanford Law, I had passed the Bar now, I’m a
lawyer trying to help the people and this is what’s happening to me. And I really feared, truly feared that I was going to get shot. I really did. And the babysitter is with the baby and I’m thinking oh my God, this is bad news. So eventually we were allowed to turn around and I was told our car had been searched with a search warrant. I had been told there had just been a robbery in a ice cream shop in Palo Alto and that the description of the robbers were three Black males on foot. And I looked at these officers, first of all we’re two Black males and one Black female in a car. What are you doing. We got an apology eventually and went on our way. But it was a not subtle reminder that in the eyes of some, and I’m talking specifically of that time of law enforcement in Palo Alto, hey we were just a bunch of niggers. We were riding in a car and probably could have robbed someone. And it was one of those shockers that just knocks you right back down and don’t take things for granted. Don’t you’re all that. You’re not all that. Because, it’s just the way it is. So anyway that part of getting back to practicing law back here in this area.

Dr. Keller: END OF TAPE and the interview of LaDoris Cordell.
When we left off on Tape 1, Judge Cordell, we were talking about a very unpleasant, horrific even, incident in Menlo Park when you were misapprehended by the police. You told me that in response to a question I asked you about how the community treated you now that you were a full-fledged citizen, and a lawyer. That was surely one horrible incident. Was that emblematic generally of how you were treated by the community?

When you refer to the community I would assume you mean, East Palo Alto. That’s the community where my law practice was located and I deliberately chose to be there because there hadn’t ever been a lawyer in private practice there. So that community received me very well. At the time it was predominantly African-American. The Latino population was growing. There were few, if any, Whites who lived in East Palo Alto so I was received very, very well. And I know the community was just appreciative that a lawyer was there in the community. Business was good meaning in terms of my being busy. Didn’t get paid a lot and I couldn’t expect to be because I ended up in a community which was predominantly low income at the time, but in the main, I didn’t run into hostility. I can’t even think of any people I ran in to who didn’t want me there actually. So I had a lot of support.

Also on the last tape you had told us that you had applied for a job as Assistant Dean at Stanford Law School but it turned out you didn’t get it initially. So tell us about that. You continued your private practice, am I correct about that?

Well I didn’t get the job initially. And I went on, I was disappointed, but I went on to continue practicing law. And I don’t remember if we talked about whether or not I had a child during that time. Remember I had a child just before I started practicing. So I went on doing what I was doing which was working ridiculous hours and doing a solo practice. Eventually I was able to bring more lawyers into the office. There was enough space to have more lawyers and I ended up with two more lawyers in the office. So within the short period time that I was practicing law there, I tripled the number of lawyers in East Palo Alto.

Were they also of color?

They were both White. Yeah. One’s no longer living, William McBay. Nice man, really progressive liberal guy and the other was Richard Potack who is a
lawyer who continues to practice law. He ended up going back East for a while
and now I understand he’s back out here. So I went on and forgot about
Stanford,--the position was the Assistant Dean for Student Affairs. And I think
it may have been a year after that, I got yet another phone call from Stanford.
This time they had the same proposal. I was in a little bit better position because
the person they had hired just didn’t work out. I think I was the only person they
were considering. So I had a little bit of leverage to kind of get some
concessions to try to get as good a deal I could get at that time. In September,
1978 I began my work as Assistant Dean for Student Affairs at Stanford Law
School, and also continued my private law practice. I had the luxury however,
of taking cases that I just wanted to take because I didn’t have to rely on a law
practice to pay all the bills. I also utilized my law practice as a way to help law
students get familiar with the real world. So in a way I was kind of ahead of the
curve. Stanford is now known for its clinical approach to teaching. It’s got a lot
of law clinics and mine was really kind of full because I would involve students
in cases I actually had and have them to go to court with me and actually work
on cases. So that began my time in academia, my first go-round in academia. I
was the assistant dean for student affairs at Stanford for four years till April of
1982. My job, I was an administrator, and my primary focus was on the
recruitment of students of color to come to Stanford Law School and here’s a
little bit of history with respect to students of color. Stanford’s first African-
American graduate was in 1967, excuse me 1968. That was Sallyanne Payton.
Then she went on to become a law professor I think at the University of
Michigan. I think that’s where she is now. She was the first African-American
graduate of Stanford Law School. And then...

Ms. Keller:
The first African-American graduate was a female?
Judge Cordell:
She is a female. Sallyanne Payton. The first Latino graduate from Stanford Law
School was in 1969 and I don’t recall right now his name. That was a male. So
Stanford when I came in 1978, had had very few African American students.
Thelton Henderson had the position that I had now had and he had really gone
out of his way to recruit students of color. It was Thelton Henderson who really
turned things around at Stanford and he was given the latitude to do this. So I
really came in following his footsteps to try to maintain that, sustain it and
improve upon what he had started. That was my focus and what I was able to do
because of the latitude I was afforded. I was to develop what was then a novel
approach to recruiting students of color. And that was to look at it as marketing.
How do you attract students? Stanford was looking at the cream of the crop, the
best of the best. The brightest and the best to come and, of course, these
students of color were also wanted by Harvard and Yale and all the other major
law schools. So I just developed an approach that looked at recruiting as
marketing. What could we do that would make us stand out and make us more
attractive--the one thing that I did that other schools had not done, but I think
they are now doing, was to be very proactive. I was out traveling all over the
country and meeting every one of these students who had been admitted to
Stanford. Actually going there. Meeting them, taking them to lunch or to dinner.
So I was all over the country. Just going in specifically to meet a particular student and that really kind of blew them away right there. And then I developed a team of law professors and alumni to whom I assigned specific students who had been admitted. And it was their job to call the students, stay in touch, answer questions and really give attention. So these students not only had the assistant dean coming to meet them, they also had alumni calling them and they had law professors actually calling them and that really was amazing. As a result during my four years there as Assistant Dean at the law school, Stanford led the nation in its enrollment of students of color. So we had far more than any of the other major and Ivy League law schools. We just completely turned it around and I did it my first year. And then sustained it because I wanted to prove to people this wasn’t a fluke and I was able to sustain it. And everybody who came in graduated. So this isn’t just, oh let’s get the numbers and not worry about it, as some law schools did. So that my main focus area, I did other things, but that was the main thing that I did there and the thing of which I am most proud. Because it worked. And it was a good thing. One last thing on this. I was able to go to places where Stanford would never have gone, where they’d never gone before. So I made it a point to go to historically Black colleges. We admitted our first graduate from Spellman. Spellman is an historically Black college in Atlanta and it’s a women’s college. We’d never admitted a student from there. I don’t think any had ever applied. But I made it a point to go to schools where there were predominantly Latinos and African-Americans in order to interest them. That’s what we should do and I hope that Stanford continues to do that.

Ms. Keller:

I want to go back to the beginning. You mentioned that you were taking Thelton Henderson’s slot. I remember your telling me in the past, a story about your arrival at Stanford and meeting Thelton for the first time. I wonder if you would tell me that story again.

Judge Cordell:

Sure. So when I arrived at Stanford, I was admitted in 1971 and I probably got there in late July or August because classes for the first year started pretty early, I was terrified. I just remember Thelton had called me when I had been admitted and he really encouraged me to come to Stanford. I didn’t know who this person was but I knew this was somebody who I wanted to know and to thank because he was instrumental in really bringing me there. I just remember arriving on the campus, I flew in, didn’t know anybody at all. Never been on the West Coast in my life. I remember eventually taking a cab that got me to the top of the oval at Stanford, which is the main entrance to the University. I remember making, before I even went to my dorm, just getting out of the cab, I remember making a bee line for Thelton’s office. And I showed up, I remember knocking on the door, or the door may have been open, I may be making that up but he was sitting in his office. And I went in and I see this man and he’s African-American. He had a little beard, little goatee kind of thing and he just looked like the nicest person. And so I walked in. I remember I introduced myself. And then I said, I thanked him for admitting me. And then the most
embarrassing thing I guess when I look back, I said I just want you to know I’m really going to work hard and I’m not going to let you down and I’m just so glad I’m here and thank you so much and I’m really really going to make you proud and I just remember him sitting there looking at me. He must have been thinking what the heck have I done. I brought in this wacko. Apparently Thelton still does remember that because we’ve had conversations about it since then and he smiled. What he did at the time was smile and say you’re going to be fine, you going to do fine. And I did okay.

Ms. Keller: Let me ask you another question. You graduated in 1974. And you took your position as Assistant Dean in 1978. So it was just 4 years since you graduated. What was it like being back with the faculty now as an adult rather than as a student?

Judge Cordell: Well I still saw these faculty members such as Barbara Babcock, Michael Wald, Jack Fredenthal, John Kaplan as, I was still in awe of these people. So it wasn’t when I first got there, hey Jack, hey Barbara, none of that stuff. I was just so glad to have a salary and have benefits and not have to worry about where each check was coming from when I was practicing law. So I really didn’t have time to reflect on that. First of all I didn’t know what I was doing in this job. So I had to learn and figure it out and as I said, could think outside the box about how to be effective and make all this stuff happen. It was interesting being back there. My class was the last class to graduate from the law school where it was at its old location. It had been there forever and a new law school had been built. So when I went back I was in this new law school, a brand new one, I had this beautiful office and big windows. It was an exciting time for me.

Ms. Keller: Did the faculty accept you as a colleague?

Judge Cordell: I don’t know. I don’t remember anyone. I think there were some skeptics probably because during law school I was the only black female in my class. There were two of us that started and the other female took a year off and then came back. So in my class I was it. And I don’t know if we talked about this earlier, but I looked like Angela Davis --I had this huge afro. And proud of it. I don’t know how they perceived that in law school but I was outspoken, outspoken meaning if we’re in a small seminar and an issue came up, I wouldn’t hesitate to talk about it. The other thing that I did was--I had this habit of doodling when I was sitting in class or also when I was on the bench and we talk about that later because it landed me in some hot water. But what I ended up doing was, I started drawing these cartoons and caricatures of these law professors. I don’t know, somebody, someone saw them and said wow, do you think we ought to run them in the student newspaper and the law school had its own newspaper. So of course, I went forward to the powers that be at the newspaper and they liked them. So I had a regular cartoon, what do you call it, series, it’s not a column, but these cartoons would appear and I still have some copies of them where I’d make fun, I’d do caricatures of these professors and
kind of poke fun at them a little. It wasn’t vicious but I just had to trust that they had a sense of humor. But I also put in a dose of reality and I talked about issues regarding race. So in any event, that’s part of what I did when I was a student so I don’t know how they perceived it when I came in on the other end. But I wasn’t running around yelling—I was representing Stanford, and traveling and trying to do as much as I could. So I don’t know how they perceived me but I ended up, I still have good friends from all the faculty who were my professors, so I tend to think I probably did okay by most of them.

Ms. Keller: You said you were there for four years. Did you have a notion of how long you were going to stay? Did you have aspirations to get higher at the law school?

Judge Cordell: It was kind of hard for me to have a plan then so I decided, I did have a plan. My plan was, I wanted two children. I just had one kid and wanted at least two. So I had my second child while I was at Stanford. Child No. 1 was born in 1975 when I just passed the Bar and started practicing law. And then I had child no. 2 in 1980. I had been at Stanford a couple of years and said okay this is the time to do this. I just did. That was the plan. The other part was I just felt that I had mastered the job after about three years and I was really saying to Stanford Law School, what else do you want me to do? And the answer I got back was nothing. The glass ceiling was there and it was, I think the glass ceiling was there for me both as a woman and as an African American, a person of color. Hey, you know you are fine. Just be happy with this because there’s nothing else going on here. And I’m not making it up because I believe I actually had a conversation with the Dean and said what can I look forward to and the answer was be happy with what you’ve got. So I wasn’t going to be, at least it wasn’t going to be easy to move up. And I wasn’t sure what moving up actually meant. I did not want to teach. I did not see that as my passion. So that’s when I had to start thinking; what else do I want to do, Judging wasn’t even on the radar screen. So it wasn’t that I sat down one day and thought “oh, I think I will be a judge”.

Ms. Keller: So what did Thelton do when he left?

Judge Cordell: So Thelton, when he left, he went into private practice. When he left, when he finished being an assistant dean, they hired someone else who lasted about a year, and then I came in. Thelton went to practice law in Berkeley or it may have been Oakland. It was across the East Bay and he was with a law firm with Joe Remcho. I can’t remember the others. A very successful law practice. That’s where Thelton was. The other thing now that you’ve brought that thing about Thelton was that when I was still deanning, I became aware that Thelton was being considered for a federal judgeship and so I contacted Thelton to see what I could do to help him and was able to make some phone calls and get people aware that he was being considered and also generate support for him. So before I left work at Stanford, before I left there, he was then on the Federal bench. I’m trying to remember the year he went on. He may have gone on in
1980. I think that’s about right.

Ms. Keller: I think you said it was about the time your daughter was born.

Judge Cordell: So here I am at Stanford, glass ceiling, I’m not seeing any women of color higher than where I am and I’m a Assistant Dean The next step up is Associate and you move up the scale, it was clear that wasn’t happening for me. So I wasn’t sure what I was going to do. That’s where we get this whole thing about things just happening, fate, who knows, and that’s when I got a phone call from a judge. I didn’t know him. His name was Mark Thomas and he was a judge on the Municipal Court in Santa Clara County, I later learned. And he called because he’d seen my name in the paper thanks to the recruiting I was doing to increase the numbers at Stanford. The program I had gotten going was being written about in the newspapers. We didn’t have the internet then and it wasn’t like it was going all over the place but it got attention at least locally. He called and asked whether I would agree to be a judge pro tem. Basically Santa Clara County had a judge pro tem program where if you had at least five years in as a lawyer you could be qualified to be a municipal court judge. But you could also qualify if you weren’t a judge, to sit as a judge for a day in their pro tem program. And Mark Thomas was trying to reach out and bring in women and people of color because the judiciary was then predominantly White and male. So all credit to Mark. Judge Thomas is a White male. He died not long ago. And he was the presiding judge in municipal court and he really felt it was important to open those doors. And so I said, well sure, I hadn’t thought about it but I was glad to. My name ended up being put on a list and I just basically forgot about it. Until I got a phone call and the phone call was from the municipal court saying my name had come up and could I come and be a judge for a day. This would be in small claims court --- Judge Judy stuff. And so I went. That was my first taste of judging and, I tell you, I was bitten by the judge bug. I can absolutely remember that case. I had one case, I think I only had one case that day. I may have had more than one. But it was this one case that just did it for me. So on this particular day I drove to Sunnyvale which was just south. I lived in Palo Alto, Stanford and Palo Alto are contiguous communities, right next to each other, and I drove to Sunnyvale which is just south of Palo Alto. First there is Mountain View and then you come to Sunnyvale— it didn’t take me very long to get there. I found the municipal court. And it wasn’t a shocker to me because, when I had practiced law, I had been in these courts. And they gave me a robe, and showed me the courtroom and I went in and said oh my goodness, what am I doing? I had to just remember what it was like when I was an attorney and I went in and presided over this case. If you want, I’ll be glad to talk about the case. Should I do that? This was a turning point in my life actually. And it was all about hair, that’s right---hair. So I called this case, I was given a file, a manila folder and it was almost empty, it just had one piece of paper in it. It didn’t explain anything. I just saw this sheet of paper that said this was a complaint and it was one woman suing another woman. But it really didn’t have too much in it. So I was on the bench and I called this case and the
two women, each of them was Black. The case, in a nutshell, was that one woman was suing the other for money—the woman who was suing had braided the other person’s hair and the person’s whose hair she had braided declined to pay her because this woman felt that she really didn’t do a good job braiding her hair. So there you go, this is right up my alley. So I’m like okay. Black woman, Black woman, Black hair. I get it. That’s me. Black hair. We Black folks hair have this thing about hair, we spend a lot of time and money on our hair and back then, I did too. When I talk about braiding, I mean all kinds of things; there’s corn rows, and back then we didn’t have weaves. A weave is taking hair that’s not yours and weaving it in to make your hair longer or fuller. So this was basically braiding that was more corn rolls. And if you want to know what corn rows are, go to Google.

Ms. Keller: I think I know what corn rows are. I’m just curious because I’m looking at you now and you have very short hair.

Judge Cordell: But back then I had big hair, I had an afro.

Ms. Keller: Did you ever have corn rows?

Judge Cordell: I don’t think I ever had corn rows because it’s too time consuming, too long. What I had was the afro; and I straightened my hair, I had the Doris Day look, that’s the straightened hair down to the shoulders, actually below, beneath my shoulders, and kind of a little flip in the, and I had really short straightened hair. Straightened, curly, and then hair, which is my hair now, which is not processed or anything. It’s just cut very short. So short that frequently, actually once a week, I’ll go to a store or a market and I get called sir. Can I help you sir? But that’s the way it goes.

Ms. Keller: So you feel like you have some expertise.

Judge Cordell: I definitely had expertise to preside over this case. I basically listened to the one women say why she should be paid, and the other woman saying why she shouldn’t. I decided to look at the evidence and I asked the woman who had her hair braided “will you please come up and is it all right with you if I check out your hair?” She came up to the bench and I checked it out and I said step back and my conclusion was that yes, her hair had been braided but it was a little shoddy. The work was not the way it should have been. It wasn’t top notch. So I ended up ordering that she had to pay the woman but not the full price. And that was it.

Ms. Keller: I have a question. How do you think one of the white male judges would have dealt with this case?

Judge Cordell: Well that was what I was going to say. You kind of jumped ahead of me on that, but as I was driving home, one of the things I thought was, I know that almost all of these judges are White males and had this case come before such a person, they wouldn’t have any clue about what these women were even talking about,
let alone be able to assess the evidence and come up with a conclusion about it. And that’s why I said wow—that’s the first thing that hit me, the second was I really liked being the one to decide. I really liked being the decider and I liked the sort of respect I received. They didn’t know me, but the fact that I was sitting up a little higher than they and was cloaked in this robe and making these pronouncements and they were like, thank you Your Honor. It was amazing. I liked all that and I thought, wow, I have all this control. It occurred to me that I had two daughters and I had nowhere near that kind of control, right? It was just amazing. It just grabbed me. So basically the robe felt good. It just felt right. It didn’t feel foreign to me at all. In fact, I really didn’t want to take it off. So as I drove home, that’s when the seed about really thinking I ought to look into this and find out what’s involved in maybe becoming a judge was planted. So thank you Mark Thomas. He died last year— he either died in 2010 or 2011—I had the opportunity to thank him in person so he actually knew that he was the one that really opened the door for me for me to go through and eventually sit on the bench. I feel fortunate because I don’t think it’s often something just hits you and you say that’s it, that’s really what I want to do. And I didn’t know what it was going to be for me. Practicing law was fine but this just really grabbed me and I decided that I was going to look into this and see if somehow I could make this happen.

Ms. Keller: So?

Judge Cordell: So the journey began and this was more than a two-year journey to get on the bench.

Ms. Keller: What year did this occur?

Judge Cordell: I was appointed in 1982. I got a phone call in April so, it was probably 1979, something like that, when I started on this journey to try to figure this out. I’d been practicing law, let’s see, at that time you had to have at least five years experience as a lawyer and I had passed the Bar in 75 so this must have been 80, so forget the 1979. It was 1980 and it did take me two years to go all through this process, so I had my five years in. So clearly, I couldn’t have set as a pro tem judge until it was 1980. If you want to be a trial judge or just a state court judge in California, you have to apply. Actually, there are two ways to become a judge; you can either run for a judgeship or you can apply and hope that the governor will appoint you. And the easier route if you’re talking about time and effort and money, is to be appointed as opposed to running. So I began, I got the application from the governor’s office and when I looked at it I said oh my god, they want everything. Everything about your life, the 10 most important cases you’ve ever tried as a lawyer and not only that the name of the opposing attorney, but the address, phone number, name of the case, case number and what was significant about the case. It took a while to actually fill this out. But if you are serious about it, that’s what you do. So I filled out the application and then submitted it to the governor’s office. This whole process, I
don't want to spend a lot of time on it, but it's a process that is political in that you can have a stellar application, but if there aren't people to support you in the community in which you want to preside, it's not going to go anywhere. So you really have to drum up support, which I had, but only among lawyers practicing in Santa Clara County, because at the time if you were a municipal court judge you could only preside in the county in which you lived. Superior court judges, at that time and still now, could live anywhere and preside in another county, but in municipal court, this is the way it worked. Now there are no municipal courts in California. That was changed in the late 1990s, so now it's just the superior court. But back then you had municipal court where you didn't handle felonies other than to hold preliminary examinations, meaning determining whether or not there was enough evidence to have the case tried in the superior court. That was about it-- there were no felony trials in municipal court, it was all misdemeanors, a lot of small stuff. There was a traffic court, small claims court; the superior court was for the heavyweight stuff, the felony trials, along with juvenile court, both dependency and delinquency cases. But you got to start somewhere and municipal was pretty big and there was a lot of stuff going on. So I ended up getting appointed and there was plenty of support and that support came from my professors at Stanford, who were just absolutely amazing and supportive. And there was support from lawyers in the community. I got a phone call from the governor's office on April 12, 1982 and I was sworn to secrecy by the governor's office.

Ms. Keller: Who was governor?

Judge Cordell: Governor Jerry Brown, who by the way, singlehandedly in the 1980s revolutionized the judiciary of California. He appointed more women, more people of color, he was the first to appoint gays and lesbians-- his record has never been surpassed by any governor since then. He just completely revolutionized it. He said, it's time to make the judiciary reflect the population that it serves. It took a lot of guts and courage for him to do that and he took a lot of heat for it. So I was one of the Jerry Brown appointees. I got the call and it became official on April 13, 1982.

Ms. Keller: When did you know?

Judge Cordell: The day before. Just one day.

Ms. Keller: So did you, in fact, not tell anybody?

Judge Cordell: I know I called my mother and I told my then husband.

Ms. Keller: What was their response?

Judge Cordell: My mother was just, well, my mother doesn't get ecstatic. She was really happy and very supportive as was my father. I called both. I talked to both of them. Here was I, a judge, when my mother's grandmother and great grandmother had
been slaves. Really, here we are. Our daughter’s a judge. What the heck?. It’s amazing. It’s sort of like Obama. He’s now president. I’m not equating my position as president but I’m just saying to have that kind of shift in a relatively short period of time is amazing, I think. And a real tribute again to Governor Brown. So that was it. I said goodbye to Stanford.

Ms. Keller: You were called on the 13th.

Judge Cordell: Yep.

Ms. Keller: When did you begin your tenure?

Judge Cordell: I started in May.

Ms. Keller: In May, so you had a month to prepare?

Judge Cordell: Yeah. I had to buy a robe, and you have to figure out what you’re doing. There at was no preparation. There was no orientation program for new judges. I just really had to show up, and hope I didn’t embarrass my family, my people, the governor. Hope I could make it happen. And it’s also weird getting used to being called Your Honor. Think about it. You’re a lawyer, you’re an assistant dean. Everybody’s calling you by your first name and now, they better not call you by your first name. And you go to the courthouse and it’s Your Honor. And everybody’s acting very differently. It’s just an amazing kind of thing. I was 32 years old— what did I know at 32? What did I know? Nothing. But I was destined to learn a whole lot and learn it quickly. So I started in May. But before I could officially start, I had to be sworn in. I had a big investiture. Thelton Henderson swore me in. The investiture was done at Stanford Law School; I had law professors there and my parents were there. Both my daughters, and my then spouse. I keep saying then spouse because I subsequently divorced him and that was in 1986. So it was big deal. Let’s me tell you why it’s a big deal. It was a big deal because there was only one African-American judge that had ever presided in Santa Clara County. There had only been one before me—he had been on the bench 20 years before me and he didn’t last long. He ended up being removed from the bench because he was convicted of a felony, conspiracy and I think there was a charge of arson, and there may have been an obstruction of justice charge. I’m not sure. So that was my predecessor. This man ended up convicted, although I’m not saying that his conviction was justified. I have looked him up. I have looked at the old newspaper articles, but it is as if he disappeared. That was the 1960s, 1962 something like that when he left. He didn’t last long. So here I come along—the pressure was on. There were very few women on the bench. There were some women on the bench in Santa Clara County, but I was it as far as African-Americans were concerned. So I’m looking at the community of women. I’m looking at people of color, especially African-Americans and I’m feeling pressure. I’m feeling a lot of pressure about not screwing up, about not making
women look bad, not making people of color look bad. I had to be prepared; I had to be on it. I had to be focused and I had to make the right decisions, whatever the heck that meant. So I was running scared the first couple of years. Now I just want you to know, for some people running scared means, Oh, you know, I’m am going to be so cautious and I’m just going to rule in favor of prosecutors because the other side can always appeal it, but I’m not going to tick anybody off. That’s not what I do when I run scared. When I run scared I prepare more and more and make sure that I know the information, I know the material and I don’t hesitate, if the case calls for it, to make a decision that might, yeah, might get a prosecutor upset. In fact, one of the first was when I was assigned to the criminal court where I remember a public defender. His name was Stephen Nakano who came before me on a case, and he brought a motion to suppress evidence on behalf of his client. In California it’s called a 1538.5 motion because that’s the section of the penal code from which it comes. My ruling on that case was in his favor, which involved granting a motion to suppress. Well, first of all, if you’re a new judge, you don’t do that. You do not come on the bench and rule to suppress evidence because supposedly we don’t know what we’re doing so we don’t make controversial decisions. That’s just a no-no. But I ruled because I thought he had a good motion, and he did have a good motion, and did I upset the prosecutors. Oh you have no idea. Word went out. Oh we’ve got a real winner here. Can’t wait to let all these criminals out of the street. I mean that started to circulate around and I had to do was to develop this mantra. And it’s still my mantra today. It is be thick of skin and long of fuse. I just have to kind of be thick skinned when it comes to people coming at me and never lose it on the bench. Be long of fuse, let people do their thing, but never do anything in anger. That’s true of life in general. We should cool down and think rationally. So I just jumped right into the fire, one might say, and it was exciting. As I said I was 32 years old, trying to do the best that I could, trying to be as fair as I could. I also tell you something else. This was kind of dream job for me because when I practiced law, I saw good old boy judges, and by that I mean these were White males who had been on the bench a long time, who treated women and treated people of color with such disrespect. Not all of them. I can remember Judge William Brown, on our court, treated me with such respect when I was a lawyer when I had a trial in his court. Judge Brown was wonderful and if only all the judges had been like him. It wasn’t that he was this real liberal guy, and in fact he probably isn’t, but he was always fair and respectful. That was not, however, my experience in most of the courts in which I practiced -- I practiced mostly in San Mateo County and Santa Clara County. These are two counties that are right next to each other. So I really wanted to set the examples. Be another example of a judge who was going to be respectful and was going to welcome people of color and women in my courtroom, be just as welcoming to them as anybody else. I really believe that after almost 20 years of being on the bench that I left the bench with that reputation. There was nobody I was going to be disrespectful to and that included the defendants. They may have committed, been accused of committing the most heinous of crimes. The issue is how do you treat them in court. They were going to get
justice out of my court but I don’t have to be a jerk in making sure that justice gets done. So it was a good opportunity for me to put into practice the things I wanted to do to address the kinds of things that judges did to me and that I saw them do to others.

Ms. Keller: So we’re almost at the end of you judging. But we really haven’t heard the beginning of it. Tell me about your first day in court.

Judge Cordell: What I can recall is that it was a criminal case. I was in the criminal division. And I had a bailiff--the bailiff is the law enforcement person.

Ms. Keller: Did you have a robe?

Judge Cordell: Yes I had a robe. You order it. You’re given all this information from the courts. They tell you here is the robe store and here’s what you order. And there are robes for the men and robes for the women. I was surprised by that. The women had little frilly, little lacy thingies and so I ordered my robe. I didn’t have a gavel. What do I need a gavel for? There are some judges that bang the gavel but I didn’t. I got some gifts as gavels when people knew I was going to become a judge but it wasn’t in my thinking to use a gavel.

Ms. Keller: How much did the robes cost?

Judge Cordell: Robes? I have no idea how much it cost.

Ms. Keller: How much were you making? Let me just ask you that.

said How much? I believe that I was making $57,000 a year. Because I think at Stanford I was making something like, $36,000 a year and I’ll bet you to this day, I bet I was underpaid, by which I mean that women were making less than men. I just believe that. So I think I got a big jump in pay. Right. $20,000 more. I think I was making $57,000. I do remember when I got the call from the governor’s office. I was asked well do you know how much you make? And I said no, I actually hadn’t even thought about that, because that wasn’t what I was about. And the person was surprised. So $57,000. I went wow. So now we’re back to the first day.

Ms. Keller: Were you still doing private practice at that time or had you discontinued?

Judge Cordell: I was still in private practice. I had a lot to do in that month. Shut down the practice, get a robe, go down to the court, see what my courtroom looked like. And I had to pick a bailiff. How do you pick a bailiff? People usually say well, here’s somebody who’s worked at the court for this other judge. Maybe you could have that bailiff. The bailiff I chose, and who worked with me the whole time I was a judge from day 1 straight through, was amazing. I consider her a dear friend--her name is Benita Jones. Benita was a deputy sheriff, because all
the bailiffs are from the sheriff's department. I started presiding in
the courthouse in San Jose-- Santa Clara County has courthouses in Palo Alto,
Sunnyvale, Gilroy and in Morgan Hill. I was assigned to San Jose; someone
introduced me and said you ought to meet this person. I ended up meeting Benita
at a reception. I think it was sponsored by a Black community organization to
welcome me to the bench because this was a big deal. That is where I met her.
And I said, “would you like to be my bailiff?” It was like asking somebody out
on a date. And she said we could try it out and see if we got along. Well, we
just hit it off. She’s amazing --we just had a great relationship and a good 20
years together. We can talk more about how all that worked. But now I had my
bailiff and I’m ready to go. There’s a buzzer in the chambers that Benita pushes
when everyone is ready to go. I have a reputation for starting on time. The
courts start at 9 o’clock; I decided to give people a 5 minute leeway because
people still had to come through the metal detector and all that stuff. So here we
go. I was scared to death, really, really scared. The buzzer goes off. Out I go. I
walk out and I look and the courtroom is just full of people. And the looks I got.
By the way, I didn’t have the afro now. I’ve toned it down, my hair was
straightened. It was shoulder length. This was the Doris Day look. I went
through my Doris Day phase there. So I’m trying to look like I’m a judge. I go
out and Benita is sitting toward the side and toward the back and she say’s it.
This is the first time. “All rise”. Oh my goodness. So I walk out. Of course,
I’m poker faced but all this is going on inside of me. And I go, Oh Good Lord.
What’s happening? Sure enough, they all stand up. And I look out and the faces
are kind of like what, what, kind of frowning and I look in the back of the
courtroom, there are a number of young Latinos. Mostly males. They’re just
smiling and some of them are giving the power sign. And I know Benita looked
at them and maybe gave them a couple of seconds before she said, all right, shut
it down. Let’s stop. So then I sat down, and Benita said be seated, and we were
off. I don’t remember the specific cases, it was more than one case because I
had a courtroom full of people but I think I was doing all kinds of cases at the
time. But that was the first day. I was off and running and I made it through
that day. I made it through and I liked it. And even though I was scared, I really
liked doing this. And I had no idea of what was ahead. And boy was there a lot
of head. But I knew I was in the right place for a while.

Did Benita saying, All Rise, did that always give you a thrill.

Judge Cordell: Well the All Rise

Ms. Keller: SECOND TAPE - NOVEMBER 4, 2012. At the end of the last tape, you were
beginning to tell me when you first became a judge if it gave you a rush. when
you first became a judge, to hear the words All Rise.

Judge Cordell: Well I will tell you initially, All Rise didn’t give me a rush. It didn’t give me a
rush. It terrified me because it symbolized having gone from being a lawyer and
then all of a sudden I’m a judge with no training. To have everybody just stand
up said to me, we have great expectations of this person. And this person, unbeknownst to them, had no clue what it was she was supposed to be doing. I had some idea that the judge runs the show, but I didn’t know how. Eventually the All Rise went from terrifying me to making me very happy because it really signified respect for me. This was important because when I went on the bench in Santa Clara County, which is either the third or fourth largest county of California’s 58 counties, there were very few people of color on any California bench and very few women of color. So it ended up meaning a lot. It went from terrifying me to making me feel very good, but then it also became a kind of a little running joke between Benita and me. I think she’s 2 years younger than I and was my bailiff the entire time that I was on the bench and since she, like me, is African American, the All Rise kind of came to be a little running, I can’t say a joke. I don’t know what the proper word for it is. But she’d say, this was after several years, she’d say All Rise and I’d come into the courtroom and I’d look at her and she’d look at me and the look between us meant isn’t this amazing. Look at this, here we are two Black women and she says the words and every one has to get up because it’s me. And she said All Rise and I’d come in and I’d look at her and we’d kind of have this wow. And then I would sit down. And then she’d say “Be seated.” But sometimes she would just hesitate that one second or two, just to really make sure that people got it. That they were standing up for me. And then she’d say be seated. And then sit. It was just kind of an understood thing. We didn’t talk about it. It was just something that evolved. And we kind of had this all through my time on the bench.

Ms. Keller: So you were on the bench for how long?

Judge Cordell: I was on the bench 18 years 9 months and a day. So I round it off, usually I say 19 years or a lot of people say 20 years or nearly 20 years. But if you want the exact, 18 years, 9 months, one day.

Ms. Keller: Tell me about some of the cases that you particularly remember, either because they were heartbreaking, or sad, or funny. What sorts of cases did you hear when you were in court?

Judge Cordell: So we’re talking a period of almost 19 years. There are really two kinds of judges in our county, maybe even California. There are judges who decide they want to just stay on one assignment and this is where they want to spend their entire judicial careers. The judge maybe says I really want to stay in juvenile court and I really want to develop an expertise and be the expert judge on matters affecting juveniles. Okay. So I am in the other group of judges who wanted to learn as much as they could about all the various assignments. We’re talking about criminal, civil, juvenile, family, probate, mental health, small claims. It’s a wide variety. And that’s what I chose to do. If you want to talk about maybe just some of the cases, there were thousands obviously over this period of time. Maybe we can go by subject matter if that’s okay with you.
Ms. Keller: What subject matter do you want to start with?

Judge Cordell: Start with kids. I guess.

Ms. Keller: Juvenile.

Judge Cordell: Juvenile court in California is divided into two areas. One is juvenile delinquency and that’s kids who commit crimes and the other is juvenile dependency and that’s with kids who have either been abused, neglected, placed in foster care, or set out for adoption. I handle cases in both. But one case that stands out for me. Let me just preface this by saying my greatest interest was always in things criminal. Why, I don’t know. But it just fascinates me that what people do in committing crimes. I don’t know what it is. So I remember a case in juvenile delinquency court. The reason I remember it was that it got a lot of publicity, and it got a lot of publicity because of something that I said and something that I did. And mind you, we’re talking in the early 1990s now. And so this was a case of a juvenile, first name was Jessica. And her last name, I’ll just say her last initial, Jessica T. She was, I think 15 years old when she came to my court and she was charged with murder. In juvenile delinquency court there’s no jury, so the judge is the finder of fact and also the person who decides on guilt and then decides on a disposition, which is the juvenile term for sentencing. Jessica T was charged with murder and her trial was in my courtroom. And what made this case unusual was that Jessica T was, well let me tell you about the murder victim. He was a young male. He was either 19 or 20. And he had been stabbed to death. His vehicle, he had a van, was stolen. And there were a number of people involved in stabbing him, two or three males; Jessica was in the group but with respect to her conduct in this murder--she didn’t know there was going to be a murder. She didn’t participate in the murder, and she wasn’t even there when the murder happened. And yet, the District Attorney’s office charged her with murder under the felony murder rule, meaning she had plotted with her friends to lure this man to this location so that they could steal his van. So she did her part by getting him to give her a ride and then lured him there. Then she left with another friend. She did not know they were going to end up killing him. So when she found out, she jumps in the van with all of them, this is a 15 year old. I think a couple of them, 1 or 2 may have been adults. Just barely adults, and off they went to Southern California. They were eventually caught. She’s on trial for felony murder. It was a very interesting trial. I ended up finding her guilty. Whether or not one likes the felony murder rule, and I really don’t, I followed the law and found her guilty. But the real battle came over what to do with Jessica T. The District Attorney, the probation officer, everybody said lock her up, send her away to the California Youth Authority which is the juvenile equivalent of a prison, and make her stay there until she’s 25 years old. I chose not to do that. I decided that she should be confined somewhere but not at the California Youth Authority. There’s something in the middle called a ranch system in California for juvenile offenders, guilty of lesser crimes. I decided to send Jessica there.
But low and behold, it turns out California at that time had no ranches for females. Not in Northern California at all. And there may have been one female ranch somewhere in Southern California. But I know I was just stunned by this, that males had the option of going to the ranch and not going to California Youth Authority but not females. I was concerned about that and felt that this was not justice. I'm not going to send her off to the Youth authority simply because the facilities aren't there. So I'm back again exploring. I actually asked the probation department. I said you find me a place where we can send her. If it isn't in the state, then outside the state. Probation was just outraged that I was even considering this because it was going against what they wanted and what the DA wanted. So the bottom line, I did find a placement for her and from what I heard later, she did the time I ordered her to do it at the ranch. And I understand she is doing fine. So that's the Jessica T. case, delinquency court. And it was in the papers quite a bit but it also sent a message to DAs and probation people in my court that I wasn't just going to fall in line because they were saying to fall in line. It's not okay for judges to do that. But unfortunately I think a lot did then. And still do that today. Okay so that's juvenile. What else do you want to hear about?

Ms. Keller: Let me ask you a question. You noted that in this case, you followed the law. Did you ever not follow the law as a judge?

Judge Cordell: Did I ever not follow the law? No, I can't think of it. Because I took an oath to uphold all the laws. So if I couldn't do that, then I should leave.

Ms. Keller: Nothing like judge nullification.

Judge Cordell: No nothing like that.

Ms. Keller: How about family court?

Judge Cordell: Family court. So family court in California. The time I was on the bench, I was in family court in 1988, 89, 90, maybe even into 91. And when I was on the bench and had gone to family court, it was really at the time considered a lousy assignment. By that I mean no judges wanted to be in family court. I think most judges saw it, it was not glamorous, and it's not going to get me in newspaper. It's just people being irrational and fighting and hollering and yelling. And I don't want to do it. That wasn't my view. I took a different view of this and actually when I went onto the Superior Court, I was elected to the Superior Court having served in the municipal court for about 6 1/2 years, I chose, I wanted to go to family court which I think is seen as bizarre by some people. Although I may not have had a choice. I was the newest person in and therefore off to family court, but it was really okay with me because I think family court judges have the most, do the most important work of all the judges. Maybe that along with juvenile dependency, because we judges are the ones that really decide how families are going to live their lives just by the orders that we make.
So I thought it was very important. Mind you I had no experience whatsoever in going to family court other than my own of having gone through a divorce about two years after starting this assignment and having two daughters. But other than that I really had no experience in it. That’s something else I just find appalling that judges get assigned to these very complex, very important cases without any training. I find it appalling. So you judge by trial and error. And that trial and error, that’s somebody’s life. We don’t do it in the medical profession, why do we do it in judging? But we do. So family court, I went there in 1988. I ended up being the supervising judge of the family court for two years, which means I was the person to whom the other family court judges reported. I made sure everybody was doing their work, or at least I hoped they were. A case that stands out for me. There were so many of them. One thing—I guess people think that as a family court judge, you get a case in the morning, then you get a case in the afternoon, and that’s how it works. No. At least not in Santa Clara County. So my morning calendar might be 35 cases; start at 9 o’clock, and be finished by noon because if you go past noon, your staff is irate because they have to get lunch and then be ready to start up again at 1:30. And I don’t see how anyone can do justice in this fashion. Then in the afternoon, maybe another 25, 30 cases. And that for me was 4 days a week. Because Friday’s was usually a down day for me, to maybe hear some law and motion cases. So this was every day. Everyday. Just making decision after decision after decision and doing it quickly, and hearing these cases.

Ms. Keller: You made custody decisions in 10 minutes?

Judge Cordell: Custody decisions yeah, sometimes. There would be custody trials. Sometimes there would be trials and judges sometimes were assigned to do trials, and they would have some trials. But in the main, there was just this volume of cases coming in and being dealt with. My approach in family court was to try and get parties to settle as many cases as possible rather than leaving it to some stranger in a black robe to settle the problems going on in their families. I would encourage them to be a part of the decision, to do it in a rational fashion. So I spent hours and hours of my time really off the bench working with various lawyers and with the divorcing couples trying to settle cases. It was exhausting. Okay so the case that makes me smile a bit is a case I call the Dreyfus affair. Now you may know about The Dreyfus Affair which is an historical event involving a Jewish soldier and this was before World War I. The late 1800s. And he was discriminated against—he was Jewish—and he was accused of I think treason. The officer’s name was Dreyfus. Well this had nothing to do with the military. I just thought it adorable to use this to describe this case because the divorcing couple’s last name was Dreyfus. So you have Mr. Dreyfus and you have the wife. I don’t know what her name was before she married him. And I guess they weren’t married. Actually if I can remember correctly, I’m sorry, it was Mr. Dreyfus and he had had a one-night stand, hence the Dreyfus affair, with this young woman and it produced a child, a daughter. The mother of the child was seeking to get child support and that was what
brought them into the court. So, you have to understand, I just get a file folder, the lawyers come into my chambers, we talk a little bit, so okay if you can’t resolve it, let’s go out and I’ll take the testimony. So the lawyers came into my courtroom and the attorney representing Mr. Dreyfus had an unusual request. What is it? Would you just talk to my client? Because I’m not getting through to him. He does have to pay child support. We have a paternity test. This is his daughter. And he’s just not hearing me. So maybe Judge, if you would just talk to him for a minute or two. That might do it, we won’t have to have a trial, and we can go in here and get this done. I said okay, fine. So the attorney brought him in and by the way, this was with the other lawyer’s permission. So he brings him in. And into my chambers, I’m standing up, he walks in, it’s this young man, he’s a very handsome guy, White guy, I’m assuming he’s Jewish only because the name Dreyfus, and I’d say he’s in his late 20s. Maybe. And he walks in and I stand up to shake his hand and he just looks at me. He does this startled look and I don’t know what to make of it. I just ignore it. But I don’t know if it was that he didn’t know this judge was Black or didn’t know I was a woman. I don’t know. It didn’t matter. But I did end up sitting down and talking with him and his attorney about the case. Then the lawyer told me what was involved and I looked at Mr. Dreyfus. I said Mr. Dreyfus, you have a child. And he just cringed. Every time I said that he’d cringe. And I said that’s not contested. And if that’s your child you’re going to have to pay support. So support is based on a formula, your income, and what the mother’s income is and at some point when I finished talking to him, he said, I get, yeah, okay, I’ve heard it from the judge, I get it. So we were able to resolve this case and not have this trial. All we need to do is put it on the record. So we go out into the courtroom. They’re out there already so Benita does the All Rise thing, I go out, they all rise and everybody’s seated. And I look out in the courtroom and I see Mr. Dreyfus and at this point he’s sitting there with his head down on the table. He’s just completely defeated. And behind him are his family members. I know one of them, he told me, or his lawyer did, that his mother was there. So the matron of the family was there. Not looking very happy. So he’s sitting with his lawyer and then I looked at the other table. And there’s the lawyer for the mom. And I did a double take and I looked and I was surprised because the mother of his child was African American, and she looked a whole lot like me. We could have been relatives. That’s when I realized why he did a double take when he met me. The man comes in to speak with the judge and he looks at the judge who looks very similar to the very woman to whom he doesn’t want to pay child support and the mother of his child. So I think he felt, oh my God I don’t have a chance here. So when I walked out and after he was seated, his head was down on the table, I got it. Of course, I look over at her, she looks at me. I think she was startled and she just smiled. Oh this is so good. In any event, they worked out an agreement. And at some point his lawyer said to me, she, my client really wants this child to have the Dreyfus last name. And he said he really didn’t want that to happen. And she insisted. She said, oh no, this is a Dreyfus. My daughter is a Dreyfus and every time she said that, I could see the matron of the family cringe and then he cringed. She was very pretty, she was
attractive, I’m sure they had a beautiful kid but it was one of these where this
was not supposed to be and it was. So I made my order for Baby Dreyfus and
that was the end of the Dreyfus affair.

Ms. Keller: I recall that you mentioned to me that, at some point, you
presided over both the probate and the mental health calendar simultaneouly.

Judge Cordell: Right, it’s one assignment in our county. I was a probate judge. That meant on
so many days a week, I’d hear probate cases. It also meant I’d hear the mental
health cases. The mental health cases were basically individuals who were in
locked psychiatric units who wanted to get out. So they would come to court
and present testimony with evidence showing that they could take care of their
basic needs and weren’t a danger to themselves or others. I’d hear testimony
and either decide that they stayed in or they didn’t.

Ms. Keller: Did many of them prove themselves worthy of discharge?

Judge Cordell: Many of them did. Some were fine and some were not. The one case that stands
out for me was the only time in court that someone attacked me. I was hearing a
case on the mental health calendar. It was a young man who was White and he
was in his early 20s. He was in a locked psychiatric unit. He wanted to get out.
And at these hearings the person is always represented by an attorney, usually
someone from the public defender’s office. And then the county counsel is
there, representing the county. And in that case, the county counsel wanted this
person to stay in the locked unit and the attorney for this young man put him on
the stand to testify. Because I’d heard medical testimony and it was not looking
too good at that point. This person really was very seriously ill. He testified. So
if you picture how the courtroom is set up. I’m sitting at the bench. Then to my
left is a witness stand, I’d say maybe four feet from where I’m sitting to where
that person is sitting. It’s pretty close. So he took the witness stand, he testified
and I quickly could see that he was operating under very serious delusions and
didn’t have a plan for when he was going to get out. He was very agitated.
When he finished testifying, he looked at me sitting just four feet from me and
his eyes were kind of big and he, so he said, so are you going to let me out, let
me go? And I looked at him and I knew that I wasn’t, but there was no way I
was going to say that with him sitting that close to me. And I said well I’m still
mulling that over, why don’t you take a seat with your lawyer and left me think
about what I’m going to do. Okay, so he steps down and he goes to sit next to
his lawyer, which put some distance between us. Each of the lawyers is each
sitting at tables that are facing me and between the tables and the bench, which
is elevated, is another table where my court reporter is and there’s also a desk for
my court clerk. Benita was sitting behind the lawyers over to the right so she
could see everything going on. So he sits down, and at that point, I said I have
listened carefully to all the testimony. And I looked right at him and said you’ve
absolutely made some progress but I really think you need to stay in the unit a
bit and keep taking the medication. And that just did it. It just set him off. He
jumped up. And I just remember him saying “why you!” and the next thing I know he’s running around the lawyer to try to get up to me. It happened so quickly. The county counsel was a male. He ran over to try to grab him and tripped over a cord. At some point in all of this he fell. And hit his head, his face, and his hand on the side of the jury box and this guy meanwhile is dodging that lawyer and running up to get me. So I jumped up. I ran over to the window. Of course, I’m thinking, we’re five stories up. This isn’t going to work. And as I’m there, and as I’m running, I also hit the panic button. All the judges have an alarm button, a silent one that lets the other bailiffs in the building that there’s a problem. So he ran toward me, Benita meantime was trying to get him coming toward me where I was at the window. He’s running toward me and all of a sudden he changed direction a little and ran right into the jury deliberation room, which was between Benita and me now. So he ran in and Benita went in after him. He jumped up on the table, a big conference table where the jurors sit to deliberate, and then started running to dive out of the window. Benita grabbed him in mid-air as he leaped and pulled him down. Benita’s not a particularly big person either. Benita’s about 5’ 10. She’s just not a big person but somehow she knows her work and her work was to protect me and she sure did. So she got him down on the ground and then other deputies came in and it took about 4 or 5 deputies to subdue him. He was just crazed. He was taken out. The lawyer had to go to the emergency room to take care of a broken finger and his face was cut up from hitting his head against the jury box. They take him out. Benita’s back seated and I sat down at the bench. Everybody else sat down in the courtroom after this and I said, “Next case” and on we went.

Ms. Keller: Were charges pressed against him?

Judge Cordell: I doubt it, and I would have been the one, the victim of this, meaning he tried to attack me. He wasn’t in his right mind. Case closed. That was proof positive that he didn’t need to be out yet.

Ms. Keller: I’m looking down at all the cases you presided over. And the amount of knowledge you need to have. I mean each of these different courts demand a vast amount of knowledge. Different from the last court. How do you do handle that?

Judge Cordell: How did I do that? I had to learn everything quickly. So before I started the probate assignment I brought the probate code home, which is this huge tome. I didn’t know what I was doing. And then I started reading it and then got some materials from some other judges. Just crammed it. You just learn it while you’re out there which is ridiculous, absurd. There are very different rules for probate. And then there are all these rules. Like the mental health calendar. 72 hour holds. And how do you decide conservatorships. You just have to learn it and act like you know when you really don’t. Part of it is faking it, until you can finally get it. I think it’s ridiculous. I don’t know of any other profession that
really allows you to do that. Particularly when you are dealing with people’s lives. Fortunately I survived, as, I think, did the people in the cases over which I presided. I was able to fake it enough until I learned it enough to be able to do it. Probate’s complicated. Wills and trusts. All the stuff we learned in law school which I quickly forgot after I took the Bar exam.

Ms. Keller: Well at least your learned it. Let’s take Family court. What do you learn about families in law school?

Judge Cordell: Nothing. Nothing. See you even think because we took wills and trusts in law school that we know something. You don’t know anything. You just memorize some things just to get you through the Bar exam and you quickly forget it. So I learned a lot. There’s no question I learned a lot. But it’s not a good system. It’s not a good way to do it.

Ms. Keller: Maybe we could talk at the end how you might see a different system. So probate.

Judge Cordell: When most people think of probate they think of wills and people contesting wills and that is a large part of what I dealt with. And the trials were interesting but they all had one theme. Greed. It was all about greed. And people wanting things more from estates of the decedent or wanting to be just included having been excluded and all kind of things going on. There were people forging signatures and forging notary signatures. Whatever, just to get money. It was really kind of sad. So the lighter moment. One of the lighter moments in probate court was the case of a man who died who was an inventor, lived and died in Santa Clara County, had several inventions to his name, and he actually had made a lot of money. He never married. Didn’t have any children and apparently when he died, there weren’t any relatives. So he was pretty much a recluse. And so he left a will. And he left his entire estate, that’s not true, he left the bulk of his estate to Tom, Dick and Mary. So I say their first names because they didn’t have last names. They didn’t have last names because Tom, Dick and Mary are three feral cats. He left his millions of dollars and his property to Tom, Dick and Mary. And you got to be kidding me. Right? And he left the balance of his estate, if there were anything left after Tom, Dick and Mary passed on to cat heaven, to several humane societies. You’ve got the SPCA, there are a number of them. Of course, this is a perfect setup. It’s a setup one, because how much money do Tom, Dick and Mary need? Well, for Tom, Dick and Mary, he set this up as some sort of a trust; so you have a trustee who oversees the money and then the trustee decided that Tom, Dick and Mary should each have lawyers. And by the way, the trustee had a lawyer. So just start counting. So you got trustee, and the trustee’s lawyered up, or the trustee may have been a lawyer. So now we have Tom, Dick and Mar, each with a lawyer because they have to decide how best to take care of their clients. So I remember one lawyer thought that, I think it was Mary should go to Paris and so Mary went to Paris. You get where I’m going here. And there was another one,
I don’t know if it was Tom or Dick had to have a fabulous cat mansion kind of thing going on there. So money was being spent left and right. So then, however, the humane societies lawyered up. Each of them lawyered up because their position was look, this money’s being squandered on Tom, Dick and Mary when there’s not going to be anything left for us so this is not right. I think there may have been six or seven lawyers. All fighting over this man’s estate and that went to these three cats. That’s all I remember, I don’t remember the outcome but it was ugly. It wasn’t good.


Judge Cordell: I really like handling criminal cases and I don’t know what it is, what’s wrong with me, why I find crime so fascinating but I do. And I find it interesting involving the police, all this stuff. I will tell you I believe the most difficult part for a judge in handling a criminal case is the sentencing. It’s not the trial, it’s not selecting the jury. It’s really what do you do with person once the person has been convicted of this crime? Because everybody weighs in. And there is a lot of pressure on the judge. There’s pressure from the victims’ families if it’s a murder case for example, or the victim if it’s not. There’s pressure from the prosecutor. There is pressure from the probation officer. And in Santa Clara County at least, probation and the DA’s office are one. They shouldn’t be because that’s not the way the rules are written, but they sit together. They always take the same view and the probation officer is very prosecution-oriented. It’s very rare to find one that is not.

Ms. Keller: Probation officers are very prosecution oriented?

Judge Cordell: Yes, they are very prosecution-oriented. Then you have the defense, the defendant who has now been convicted and the defense attorney and then the battle begins. And it’s really hard. It’s very, very hard because there is a lot of pressure on a judge. When I first started judging, we’re talking the early 1980s, I had been counseled by some of the good old boy judges who were on the bench, one in particular paid me a visit and told me just go along with the program. Do not upset the prosecutors and you’ll never have a problem. And if you don’t rule the right way, hey, the other side can always appeal it. Just don’t go out on a limb, that’s how I do it. I was appalled when I heard this—that wasn’t me, never has been me. So I’ll tell you about a case. This was early on. So I’m presiding over criminal cases. Now I told you about family court and the numbers sound appalling. Right. Well criminal cases, picture 80 to 100 in the morning. In the morning. Another 50 or 60 in the afternoon. So I’m handling arraignments, and sometimes sentencing. And justice was swift in my courtroom if you want to call it justice because I really don’t. But one does the best one can. It’s just that there were so many cases coming in. And I just remember having laryngitis all the time because after a while when you advise someone of their rights, a person of his or her rights at an arraignment, you have to recite all of these rights. And you have to do it every single time for each
person. And that repetition just kills you. Kills the throat anyway. So here’s the case; two White males, they’re either 18, early 20s, they stand before me with their lawyer and this was the arraignment calendar so I’m not there to do anything other than advise them. And the lawyer says, look, my clients just want to plead right now. And that way they would come back to me for sentencing. Whatever judge takes the plea, that’s the judge who does the sentencing. Okay, so I don’t know anything about this case, they want to plead. They’re looking a little fearful. But that’s to be expected. Right, they’re in criminal court. But there was yet another reason why. So I take their plea but before I do of course, I open the file and note that they’re pleading guilty to vandalism. So then I read very quickly through the police report that’s in the file and that’s when I look up and see why they’re looking at me a bit fearfully. And that is because their crime, what they had pleaded guilty to, is that they had gotten angry with a friend, someone their age, and they had one night gone to enact some revenge on the person by going to his home where he lived with his parents and they set up a cross on the lawn and then set fire to it. So they burned a cross on the lawn and then they spray painted the letters KKK on the side of the house. Their friend was African-American. These were two White guys. So they came into court and of all the judges, and at that time I was still the only African-American judge on the bench, who do they draw but me. So their lawyer apparently trusted me enough to say, just plead. She’s going to do the right thing. And I’m sure they were terrified. So I took their plea and put this over for sentencing. They came back for sentencing, fully expecting to go to jail or get a fine, whatever. And I decided not to do that. Actually I decided to give them an option and here’s what I said to them. I’ve read the file. You don’t have any prior criminal history. I don’t think you’re bad people, but you did a very bad thing and I’m going to give you a choice. I’m going to sentence you to jail for 30 days. Their eyes just got so big. Like oh my God, no. Or no jail at all if you will go to San Jose City College. I had done my research and found a seminar called Third World Cultures. I had spoken with the professor and told him about these two young men and what I wanted. This course went for a semester, met once a week for three hours in the evening so it wouldn’t interfere with their work schedule, whatever they were doing and I said to them, you can take this course; you have to pass it and also write me a paper. They both opted to do that rather than to go to jail and I’m glad they did. Then I put it over for further sentencing and sure enough several months later they came back in and each had written a paper. I remember each of the papers was on Martin Luther King, and they also offered up written letters of apology to the family. So that kind of set me on the path of thinking outside the box. Not just to do it, but if there’s a good reason do it, do it. And I think that taxpayer dollars were better spent on them going to school and getting their minds opened up just a little bit versus taking care of their board and keep for the 30 days they would be sitting in the jail.

Ms. Keller: Despite being a noxious crime, that’s a fairly lightweight crime in what you must have heard in criminal court. Have you ever had a whole lot worse.
Judge Cordell: Yeah. I've presided over just about every kind of crime you could think of. Rapes, just horrible cases. Cases where, I had one case where a woman was raped and what made this so horrible, the rape bad enough, but she was in her late 70s and she was a nun. And this man had just gone into this convent. I don't know if they call it convent, it was where she worked and he raped her. She was so brave testifying in court. So brave with this man sitting there looking at her. And I'll tell you another factor that weighs in--he was African-American. She was White. And I'm just feeling so badly for her. And she was so courageous. This guy. I just felt badly. Here I am Black and here's this Black man and he did this to this woman who is a nun and it just was horrible. So that brings up for me this whole issue when someone comes into court that looks like me, African-American or Black woman, what does that do? It shouldn't affect anything. And will I tell you that I sentence differently because a person was Black and was bad? No. It just made me feel so badly even more because somehow I had the feeling, I know this sounds ridiculous, of being responsible in some way. Here's somebody who is African-American, doing these horrible things. But I didn't take it out on the person. There are some people, I think, they just have self-hate, so much that they see somebody that comes in that looks like them and they hate themselves so much, they just really take it out on the person. That is not what I'm saying. But it's just this collective kind of thing. I think maybe most groups of people think this way. When I heard, for example, that there were these two snipers in Washington, DC killing those people, I was thinking Black people don't do that. And of course, they were both Black. It was a collective thing. A lot of Blacks said oh my God this was horrible. We had nothing to do with that. So it, sometimes I did feel that way, sociologically responsible, when I was in court presiding over these cases.

Ms. Keller: Did you, particularly in sentencing, when you had some Black folks, did you feel a special pressure in instances where the victim was, in fact, White and the defendant was Black?

Judge Cordell: Oh yes.

Ms. Keller: And I imagine the Black family breathed a sigh of relief when they saw you were there. Because they'd get a fair shot.

Judge Cordell: It's this whole issue of race that nobody ever wants to talk about in this country, but it's always the elephant in the room. But I think it's true of any judges. Let just first talk of judges of color. Whatever ethnicity it is, when you have a defendant, let's just talk criminal cases, come in and the person sees you and you are of the same ethnicity, that person thinks, oh, I'll probably get a break. At least this person is going to understand, right? And then sometimes on the other side, if they are not of the same ethnic group, they may be thinking, this judge is not going to be fair to me. That's being in America and how people deal with
race. Sure I felt the pressure. Of course, I felt the pressure. I’ve had, you know, defendants come in my courtroom who were African-American, particularly females, they’ll come in and oh, they’ll just start smiling knowing they’re going to, you know it’s their day. And it might have been their day if it warranted being their day. But did I feel the pressure to do the right thing? Yes, I felt the pressure. I can still feel it. So that’s yet another challenge of being a judge, of being a female judge and being a judge of color. I don’t think that White male judges think much about this issue. It’s just not there. It’s there for those of us of color and especially those of us who are of color and are women. So yeah, it’s part of the turf. It’s what comes with the job. Did I know that going into judging? No. But I quickly learned it.

Ms. Keller: Are judges ever recused from a case because of their race or your gender?

Judge Cordell: Let’s talk about criminal cases now. A prosecutor or defense attorney can have one free challenge of a judge for no stated reason. They very rarely avail themselves of it because the word goes all around the courthouse, wow really, it’s called an affidavit. They affidavited Cordell or something. So it rarely happened to me. I do remember a lawyer in family court who said, well, you’re a woman, and my opposing counsel’s client is a man and you shouldn’t hear this case. I was outraged by that one. But there is a specific Code section in California and I think it’s the Civil Code, I may be wrong, or the Code of Civil Procedure that says that a judge may not be challenged or excused solely because the judge is of the same race, same sex, same ethnicity as the person and maybe some other factors. So that lawyer was totally out of line.

Ms. Keller: Do you remember ever being affidavited because you were Black?

Judge Cordell: I just can’t remember. It was so rare that I was affidavited.

Ms. Keller: I have two other sections I want to ask you about. And I think to some degree they may be related. So let me just throw them both at you and you answer the way you want to answer. What is your experience with the three-strikes law? And the other is plea bargaining. So take it away.

Judge Cordell: So let’s just talk briefly about plea bargaining. Without plea bargaining, the system would implode because there are too many cases coming in, this is again criminal cases. So many cases coming into the system that if all of those cases were to go to trial, there aren’t enough judges, there aren’t enough courtrooms, there aren’t enough days of the year to try all these cases. So the pressure is on everybody—prosecutors, defense attorneys, judges to plea bargain. To basically put a bargain out there in order to get these defendants to plead. And whether or not you think that’s a good thing, the fact of the matter is it is a necessity in the systems that we have. Until we get a better system that is able to handle the load, that’s the way it is. And it turned out when prosecutors and defense attorneys wanted to really get defendants to plead, that both sides wanted it, a lot
of these cases got steered to me. To my court. Particularly after the three-strikes law passed. I will see if I can say this in a nutshell for you. In 1994 the electorate voted into law in California the three-strikes law. It was also made a law by way of the Legislature. So this is unique in California history in that both the identical laws were passed by the Legislature and also by the electorate. Because it was passed by the electorate, the three-strikes law could not be changed without another vote of the electorate, as opposed to if it just went to the Legislature, the Legislature could just vote and take care of it. So the three-strikes law basically, this was 1994, was that if a person has been convicted...actually, there are two parts to the three-strikes law. I'm just going to talk about the one part that everybody knows about. If a person has been convicted of two violent or serious felonies and is again charged with a third felony-- that felony could be non-serious or serious or violent, remember the first two have to be either violent or serious. If the third strike, third felony could be any of them, the district attorney has the discretion to charge them as a third strike. Doesn't have to, but can. In which case [END OF TAPE]
Dr. Keller: This is January 1, 2013. This is Florence Keller interviewing Judge LaDoris Cordell. Happy New Year Judge Cordell.

Judge Cordell: Thank you. Same to you.

Dr. Keller: We were talking about the three-strikes law when we left off, and plea bargaining. And we were talking about how it was implemented in California. So I want you to pick up from where you left off.

Judge Cordell: So as I recall, I explained generally what the three-strikes law is. The district attorney has the discretion to charge any third felony, be it serious or non-serious, violent or non-violent as a third strike. In Santa Clara County where I presided, the district attorneys embraced the three-strikes law. And so much so that just about anything that moved in that county, if it looked like it might be a felony, they jumped all over it. And what they did also was, and the statistics bear this out, a disproportionate number of individuals charged with three-strikes were people of color. Primarily African-American males and Latino males. So you ended up with a system in which people were just being pulled into this criminal justice system under the three-strikes law. Now I’m not saying these folks were innocent and all of a sudden the district attorney was just going and getting innocent people. People were out there
committing crimes. But the district attorney’s office was using its discretion to charge these crimes when they could as third strikes. When you have a third strike, the consequences are if you are convicted, that you’re then sentenced under this law, 25 years to life. And you cannot get out before serving the first 25 years, every day of it. So there’s no credits or anything like that. You’re in and you’re in for a long time. So if you are a three-striker and you are now ready to go to trial, there’s nothing to deal with here. Unless you’re going to go to trial. And you’re going to go to trial because, you’re facing 25 to life. What you not going to do, is plead to it. No. There was one little glitch in the law and that is the glitch, it’s actually not a glitch, it actually allows judges, this is again under this law when it was enacted in 1994, some discretion to basically say, you know what, this crime really isn’t a third-strike. It shouldn’t qualify and I’m going to use my discretion to say to either dismiss it or get it out. It’s a very narrow area in which judges have some discretion. Because the three-strikes law really put it all in the lap of prosecutors. It took from 1994 to 1996 to really work out this narrow window of judicial discretion meaning judges asserted hey, we have to have some say in this, prosecutors said no and this had to be litigated. And the big case that brought all this together is the Romero case. Mr. Romero’s case was used as a vehicle to bring it up to the Supreme Court in California to determine to what extent, if any, judges had discretion to basically get rid of a third strike. So at the end of all of this the Romero case worked its way through the courts. We end up in 1996 where it was decided. The decision was that judges, we do have some narrow discretion. So if, for example, the person’s first two strikes of which they’ve already been convicted were very remote in time-- let’s say it happened when the person was a juvenile and now the person’s 47 years old and there
was an 18 year, 20 year gap, then the *Romero* case said well you judges, you can exercise your discretion and say, wait a minute, this is isn’t what the three strikes was meant to do. This isn’t one of “really repeat offenders.” Something happened, there was a gap; you can use your discretion. So that being said, not many judges in the state and specifically in the county in which I presided were really exercising their discretion. They were really basically saying, you prosecutors, it’s all yours. Three strikes, you want to charge it, we’re not going near it. We’re leaving it alone. And it was a safe thing to do for judges because prosecutors don’t take it very kindly when judges basically contradict them. It’s not the way the system should work but that’s the way it was working in Santa Clara County and that’s the way I think it works in most counties at least in California, where the prosecutors carry the day, judges kind of sit back and, for the most part, do what they’re told to do. Now there are some judges who actually believe that everything prosecutors do is right, so they don’t have an issue with it. I was not one of those judges. I absolutely believed in the independence of the judiciary and that prosecutors have no right whatsoever to tell me what to do. And that being said, do I believe the prosecutors were right in how they charge their cases? In some cases absolutely. And many times, often times, I disagreed. So the word got out, and believe me there’s a grapevine among prisoners and the jail, the inmates, and everybody talks. And they are constantly talking, I’ve learned, about the “good judges” and the bad judges who they could get a break in front of or who they had a shot at least in getting a fair trial. So word got out that there was this judge, this Black woman judge who was using the *Romero* decision and in some cases dismissing strikes. And that would be me. And I looked at these cases carefully and when I felt that I was right or the
district attorneys were wrong, then I would do what I thought was right. It did not endear me to the prosecutors. Word went out and so what happened was this phenomena, this plea bargaining thing. Cases were backed up. Everybody, three-strikers were going to trial. The jails were just loaded up and so word got out. What these inmates started doing was to say “well look, we’ll plead guilty straight up if we can be sentenced in front of Judge Cordell.” Because with me, at least they felt the had a chance. And generally the rule is this. If you were the judge who takes the plea, in other words, if I want to plead guilty in front of you, that judge then is the judge that has to sentence you. That’s the rule. But they didn’t follow that rule in Santa Clara County on these three-strike cases. So different judges were taking these guilty pleas on the condition that these defendants would then end up in my court for sentencing. So I ended up spending many years when I was handling all these three-strike cases, so we’re talking 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998 where I was basically just doing sentencings. And these sentencing hearings involved defense attorneys bringing in evidence to show that this person fits in the Romero definition and asserting that I should dismiss the strike. And some of the cases were some instances where I wasn’t going to dismiss these people, and there were, there were very close calls, where I was torn, should I, should I not do it, should I do it. And there were some where it was just clear to me that absolutely, they should not be in the three-strikes arena. So I ended up as the judge who really became the three-strikes judge. I helped everybody clear their calendars because people were pleading guilty and they just stacked them up in my courtroom and it was for me to deal with. It was very hard. Let’s put it that way. There were some really bad days where I had people coming in looking very hopefully at me, these defendants thinking they were going
to get out from under this three-strikes law and that did not happen. And sometimes I just felt that I wanted to do that, meaning I wanted to say I’m going to dismiss this strike, but the way the law was written and given how narrow my discretion was, I knew legally I couldn’t do it. And it was just really, really hard for me. I can just remember, if you want, I can give you just one example, one case because it was my last three-strike case. I am going to stop the tape here.

Dr. Keller:: Before you go to your last case, I had one question. I’m surprised that when defendants chose to go to trial that juries just didn’t rise up and rebel and say we’re not willing to sentence this person to 25 years to life for what is essentially a petty crime or that his first two strikes were as remote as they were. What was your understanding of why juries didn’t rebel?

Judge Cordell: Well first of all jurors don’t know what the sentence is going to be and in fact they are, it is explicitly told to the defense attorney and prosecutors, that they are not to be let the jurors know that this is a three-strikes case. Jurors find out sometimes afterwards so all they know is that they’ve convicted somebody of a petty theft. What they didn’t know was that petty theft was charged as a third strike and now that person is looking at 25 to life. And anecdotally I can tell you that some jurors were outraged afterwards and have said I would never have convicted this person had I known that, but they’re not allowed to know. And truly this is not an exaggeration. Some of the kinds of crimes the district attorney was almost routinely charging as third strikes were petty thefts and I’m talking thefts of tee-shirts, a slice of pizza, stealing a six-pack of batteries. There were also those who were charged with possessions of small amount of drugs that were charged as three strikes
and those folks, many of them, thousands of them are still in prison serving their first 25 years. Although that’s going to change now because Californians in 2012 passed Proposition 36 and what Prop 36 did was what Proposition 66 back in 2004 was unable to do. It has now changed the three-strikes law starting today. It has changed the law so that California comes into line with most of the other states that have three-strikes laws, which means that the third-strike can only be charged if there was a serious or violent felony. So finally it has changed.

Dr. Keller: I know you were involved in some of the politics behind those propositions. But first why don’t you tell me about what you were starting to tell me about your last case.

Judge Cordell: Well, I’ll just wrap this up but talking about the case, the last three-strikes case that I handled that really started me on the trajectory of thinking about leaving the bench. I’d really had enough and I was worn out by the pressures of dealing with these three-strike sentencings and having to sentence people to life where sometimes I absolutely believed it was warranted and other times not. The one case, the last case was one where I felt what I had to do was wrong but I did it because the law required me to do it. The case involved an African-American male, his third-strike was a domestic violence case where he assaulted the woman with whom he had been living. They were both drunk and they got into a big argument. He did not seriously hurt her, but he could have. And when the police arrived he was just yelling and screaming and one of the things he was heard to yell when they were taking him away in the patrol car, he was still screaming at this woman, was “I’m going to get you,” or something like “I killed her, I killed somebody before and I’ll get you.” Something like that. I’m just paraphrasing. So it turns out
that this man, 20 years before, had been drunk, and had been in a relationship with a woman, and it was a tumultuous relationship and they got into it. Two other men were on the scene as well. So they were all, I think, either drinking and or doing drugs. There was a big argument that took place and there was a fight. And in the fight, he stabbed one man. I think he killed the man. I may be getting my facts wrong. I know one of them died as a result. And he went to prison for manslaughter and served his time. So his first two strikes came about some 20 years before the incident for which I was to sentence him.

Dr. Keller: He got two strikes for one crime?

Judge Cordell: You can get as many strikes as the DA wants to charge out of one incident or five. It doesn’t matter.

Dr. Keller: So these two strikes were the same crime?

Judge Cordell: I don’t know, I can’t be certain, I don’t have the specific recollection but what I can tell you is that the district attorney’s office—I know one case in which a woman was charged with six strikes out of one incident. They can look at all different kinds of conduct. And if they so do, that’s what gives them so much power. They can charge it in whichever way they choose. So when that woman picked up a petty theft which she did, it was charged as a third strike and she is currently serving 25 to life and has been in 18 years on that petty theft. That was not a case in my court, but I am aware of that one. So when this case came to me, this man had pled guilty to the third strike and on the condition that he could come into my court. So here he was, he had a very good defense attorney, it was a public defender and he was just very, very hopeful that I
would dismiss this strike, because of the remoteness in time issue. Also he ended up being in the jail for more than a year waiting to get sentenced--it is to the benefit of defendants to try to drag it out as long as they can because the case they could make for redemption or rehabilitation gets stronger and certainly during that year, this man took every single program that the jail had to offer. He was going to AA, NA meetings, everything, and had all these certificates. The man had really done everything he could have done and the argument that was being made to me was that “look he’s changed, and he’s really a different person.” I’m not also saying, by the way that he hadn’t committed any crimes between that first one, the manslaughter one; there may have been some drug stuff going on in there as well. So the case came before me and both sides passionately argued the sentencing in front of me. And because of the way the Romero decision was written, I concluded that even given the remoteness in time, he had picked up these other offenses, this was a pretty violent kind of thing that he had done. And I realized that I couldn’t, under the law, I could not dismiss this strike. I could not make it into a misdemeanor, and that was the only way to get it out of three strikes territory. I just couldn’t do it. I wanted to because I really believed he had changed and he should not go away for what was essentially life. He was looking at 40 to life—25, and then they tack on additional charges for whatever. So I ended up sentencing him to the 40 to life or whatever and I was very unhappy. It was really after that I said this is just not what I want to do, I don’t feel good about this. And I need to really maybe move on. I’m going to stop the tape.

I was burning out and realized that it was time for a change. The question was what to do next. The answer came when I learned of a position at Stanford University
that caught my interest. I applied and after a national search, I was appointed Vice Provost and Special Counselor to the President for Campus Relations. It’s quite a title, but simply put, it’s an administrative position. I made the big move, a bit scary I must admit, but it worked for me for the next eight years, from 2001 to 2009.

In 2003, while I was working at Stanford, some neighbors came to me because they were really concerned about the dysfunction of the Palo Alto City Council. I live in Palo Alto. There are nine people on the council. The people who approached me were very concerned about the level of dysfunction. And they implored me to run for a seat on the City Council and I decided to do it for whatever reason, I have no idea why, I guess... no, I do know why, it’s because I think it’s important to not just complain and talk about how you want to make things better. If you can, you jump in there and do it. And you can make change on the micro-level, which is the city council, as well as the macro, which would be the senate and all of that. So eventually I decided to go for it. But I had to be persuaded before I decided to run for the City Council. There were a number of seats open, but there were a whole bunch of people who were running for those seats. I think there were three seats open and there were at least, I think, 11 people running. And two of them at least were incumbents. So I ran, and just very briefly, my campaign strategy was to do what the other candidates were not doing. That makes you stand out. So all the candidates were either raising money by going to ask people for money, having fundraisers, or taking money out of their own pockets. The typical person running for city council in Palo Alto then, and this would have been, the election was in 2003. The typical amount was between $20,000 and $30,000 for a seat on the City Council and the term was four years. I decided not to take
any money from anybody and to basically run with zero financing, with no money other than some minimal amount of money from me -- it was approximately $2,000. But what I did do was what the others didn’t do as well, which was to develop a grassroots campaign. I had people who just volunteered to campaign for me and the people resonated to my message, which was no money, don’t ask for money, I’m not taking any. Some people thought I was crazy and one of them was the President of Stanford. I went to him since he was my boss, and I said “I’m thinking about running for the City Council. Do you have any problem with that? And by the way I’m not going to accept a penny from anybody”. I remember him laughing and saying, well go ahead. What I think the laugh meant was, you’re not going to get elected if you have no money. But I was elected and I actually had more votes than two of the incumbents. I served on the City Council for four years and did that while I was also the Vice Provost at Stanford.

Dr. Keller:  Busy time.

Judge Cordell:  Busy indeed.

Dr. Keller:  Did you consider rerunning for a second term?

Judge Cordell:  Well I was asked to stay on a second term but there was no way in the world I would consider that. The City Council meetings were every Monday night and usually went anywhere from four to six hours. There were tons of reading. I was doing all this in addition to working fulltime and there’s just no way I could it again. But I did learn a lot. I learned about how cities run, about infrastructure, about finance. All kind of things I would never have even thought of before. So I’m glad I had the experience.
Dr. Keller: Also I think it was during that period at Stanford that you became quite involved in an anti-three-strike initiative in proposition.

Judge Cordell: I’ve already talked about that Prop 66 in 2004.

Dr. Keller: And what did you do for that?

Judge Cordell: Well, I think we’ve already mentioned that, I was one of the spokespeople for Proposition 66. I debated it several times, but it didn’t pass.

Dr. Keller: And then, at some point you decided to leave Stanford?

Judge Cordell: After 8 years, yeah I had enough of academia. That was in 2009, January. So in 2010 I became of aware of a position that was open in the city of San Jose. The city of San Jose is about 12, 15 miles just south of Palo Alto. It is the 10th largest city in the United States and has a population of about a million people. Someone contacted me and asked of my interest in applying for a position as the independent police auditor for the City of San Jose. I had no idea what that was but I decided to look into it and once I looked into it, realized that this was something I was interested in. Basically the work of an independent police auditor is another word for civilian oversight of law enforcement. There are civilians whose responsibility it is to hold police officers accountable. There are many major cities that have civilian oversight and there are many that do not. So if you have a complaint you want to make about the police, and if there is civilian oversight. you go to that office and that office basically processes complaints and oversees investigations into complaints to make sure that things were done properly. In cities that don’t have civilian
oversight, if you have a complaint about a police officer, you go right to the police department, make your complaint. They investigate themselves and they tell you here’s the result. I became interested in this civilian oversight business and applied for this job; a national search was done and I was selected. I was asked to take the position and I took it. I’ve been in the job 2 1/2 years and it’s fascinating. I’d say, next to judging it’s probably the most fascinating thing I’ve done. I’ve learned a tremendous amount and one day when I’m finished being the independent police auditor, I’ll be able to talk more fully about the work it is that I do.

Dr. Keller: So you never seem to be able to do only one job. While you were in this new position as the IPA, independent police auditor, you again got involved in a campaign to rid California of the excesses of the three-strikes law, isn’t that the case?

Judge Cordell: Not really. What I did, and this was just recently, I became involved in the initiative to repeal the death penalty in California. And that was Proposition 34. At the same time, there was an initiative on the ballot in 2012, Proposition 36 that was to change the three-strikes law. I was less involved in that but decided to jump full steam into trying to repeal the death penalty. I’ve always been opposed to the death penalty, and when I was on the bench I made it known to as many judges as I could on the bench that I did not want to be assigned a death penalty case. I don’t believe in it period. For a lot of reasons. So for Proposition 34, I was on the ballot, I was one of the spokespeople for it, I debated prosecutors, but Proposition 34 failed. It did not pass, it was a close one, and it did not pass. I look at that experience the way I looked at Proposition 66 that became Proposition 36 that did pass.
The death penalty initiative is going to be on the ballot in California most assuredly. Eventually it will pass because people are seeing, primarily I think will vote for it, not so much because they have moral issues about the death penalty and about killing someone. It's more really now the economics. And it doesn't matter to me what your view is as long as your view is that it should be repealed. I really believe it's going to pass. I do believe that judges who retire from the bench shouldn't retire from life and shouldn't retire from being active into trying to continue to make the system better. And if you didn't do that when you were on the bench, it's not likely you are going to do it off the bench. But for those who really want to see these changes happen, we retired judges can be just as effective maybe even more so, because we're less restrained in what it is that we can say and do when we're off the bench.

Dr. Keller: You've actually used a couple of judges I think in your independent police auditor work to help with mediations between police and the public.

Judge Cordell: Right. So one of the things that I've initiated in San Jose is getting police officers and the people who complain about them to sit down together and to basically mediate the complaint. That complainant withdraws his or her complaint if the officer will sit down in a civil and respectful setting and talk about what happened. Usually these are complaints about discourteousness and about rudeness or an officer's use of profanity. So the system, the program that I have set up in San Jose is an entirely voluntary one. The officer doesn’t have to do it. If the officer does it, the complaint is withdrawn. And the civilian doesn’t have to do it. But the civilian, if he or she does agree, gets what most people don't get; a face-to-face up close and personal with an officer who offended him. I
had to come up with the person who would be the right mediator. Someone that law enforcement would respect and someone that members of the public would respect and that turned out to be retired judges. Our county is full of them. So I wrote a letter to every retired judge in the county and asked them to volunteer their services, to do this for free and judges have stepped up. It’s worked beautifully. I started this program in 2011 and we started off and we were able to do five mediations and in 2012 we did thirteen. And I expect that we will continue to do that. It’s interesting. Research shows that when officers engage in mediations they tend not to again engage in the behaviors that brought them the complaints in the first place. We are not the first city to do mediations but we’re the only city that utilizes retired judges and gets them for free.

Dr. Keller: And to just put closure on the three-strike law, you said something about Proposition 60 whatever turned into Proposition 30 whatever and that that amended the three-strike law. In what way did that amend the three-strike law?

Judge Cordell: So Proposition 66 was on the ballot in 2004 and I worked on that. It didn’t succeed. Then Proposition 36 was on the ballot in 2012, so it just took us 8 years and it passed, overwhelmingly passed. It wasn’t even close. And so the law has now changed so that crimes charged as third-strikes can only be serious or violent felonies. So no longer can a third-strike be a petty theft or possession of drugs. It has to be a violent felony or serious felony.

Dr. Keller: It occurs to me that one thing you didn’t talk about in talking about your experience as a judge so let me go back a little was about your dealing with drunk drivers.
Okay. In 1984, I’d been on the bench about two years. I was driving home from work. I was on the freeway, Highway 101, and it was about 5:30 in the evening. I was hit, rear-ended by a drunk driver. He totaled my car. I ended up being off work for about 8 weeks. I had a hairline fracture of the spine and basically my lower back hasn’t been the same ever since. This drunk driver I later learned received a slap on the wrist, kept his license, paid a fine, went to some classes and I don’t know if anything else happened to him. I don’t believe it did. So when I was able to return to work, I had a very different view about drunk drivers. I didn’t like them anyway but I liked them a whole lot less after being a victim. I realized too that in my first two years on the bench I’d been assigned the arraignment calendar where I would hear just case after case of people charged with driving under the influence. They’d come into my court to be arraigned and I’d basically tell them what the charges were and what their options were. Then I would continue the case. Sometimes they would plead guilty. But I would just do this routinely and not even think much about it and that was it. I was told early on that’s the way you do it here because we have so many of these coming into the courts that we can’t spend a lot of time on them. Just process them through don’t think about it, just do it. Well after you’ve been victimized by a drunk driver, you start to think about these things more seriously and I did. So when I went back to the court, I realized that we weren’t really dealing with this problem and it was a huge problem. I really started looking at the numbers and the large hundreds, over a 100,000 drunk driving arrests in California every year. Maybe it’s closer to 200,000 now. So I decided to look into and to actually see what I could do as a judge to make the system more responsive to this very serious problem.
In 1987 I became the first judge in the state of California, I
didn’t know it at the time, but later learned it, I became the
first judge in California to order convicted drunk drivers to
install ignition interlock devices in their cars. I had done
some research about drunk driving and came upon this new
thing; this was a new device, just had been really invented;
there was a plant that manufactured them here in
California, northern California. I contacted the company,
met with the representative and started to learn about this
device. The device is a very simple one in that it is
installed in the ignition system of a car. It’s about the size
of a cell phone and it requires the driver to blow into the
device and if the breath that is detected by the device
shows that the driver has any alcohol in his or her system,
then the car will not start. The device will keep the
ignition from firing up. So I looked at this and decided
that I wanted to sentence drunk drivers who came into my
court, I wanted to sentence them to put this device on their
cars. And this was a new thing. I knew that. So what I
decided to do was to tell people they had an option in my
court. I will either sentence you to jail, you will go to jail,
or you can put this device on your car for three years. You
will have to lease it, you’ll have to rent it and it gets
calibrated every so often, periodically, but the calibration
sheets being generated by a computer printout come to me.
I get to look and I can see from this printout every time the
car was attempted to be started, every time it started and
what the breath alcohol, the alcohol level was.
Surprisingly I got a lot of people who opted to take this
device rather than serve some weekends in jail. And so
began this new thing, trying to keep people from driving
while under the influence. Things were going along pretty
smoothly. This attracted some media attention. I was able
to sentence many people and I was up to at some point 70
or 80 people who had opted to go with this device. And
the reason I was able to get people I think able to do it was that at the time, it was about, there was an installation fee for the device and then maybe $25 a month. But it had to be done for three years because generally probation for drunk driving, which is a misdemeanor unless there is major injury or major property damage, results in a probation that lasts basically three years. The requirement generally, without these devices, is that a person has to pay a pretty big fine. And what I did in order to get people to agree to use the device was to reduce the fine, lower it, so it enabled people to pay for the devices; it really, really was working until I was requested by the district attorney’s office to stop doing that, and by that I mean reducing the fines. The district attorney representative came to my chambers and told me that by reducing the fine I was doing something that was illegal. These fines were mandatory I was told and there’s just no way that I could lawfully reduce them and I was costing, according to them, costing the county money because the fines, some portion of them goes into the coffers of the county. My response was that but I’m saving lives here. Because what we were doing previously wasn’t anything really. We were telling people yes you have a drunk driving conviction, and you’re on probation for three years but here’s your license, have a good life. That wasn’t working. And of course, the drunk driving rates had not gone down in California. In fact everything was going up. So I declined to do what the district attorney asked me to do, and they did what they felt they had to do. They lawyered up and they sued me and they took me to court. This, of course, made the news and I had to have a lawyer represent me. Fortunately the lawyer with our county counsel’s office agreed to represent me and off we went to court. I was in front of one of the judges in my county. At this time I was on the municipal court. There doesn’t exist a municipal court now in
California. Now there’s only one trial court, it’s the superior court. But back then there was a municipal court, a trial court and a superior court, also a trial court. The municipal court handled the lower level cases, misdemeanors; it did not handle trials of felonies. Those were heard in the superior court. Municipal Court did not handle the big civil cases but handled the lower-level civil cases meaning cases not involving lots of money. So I went before a superior court judge and the judge ruled against me, and ruled that I could not continue to reduce the fines because to do so was not lawful even though I was doing it for a very good reason. As a result of that I couldn’t offer people a reduction of fines, and so people were not opting for the device and the program that I had initiated really came to a halt. I was really concerned about it, and didn’t know what to do until I got a phone call. And the phone call was from my contracts professor at Stanford Law School. His name is Byron Sher. Byron Sher called me, and at that point he was, as well as being a professor at Stanford, he was in the California State Assembly. And he’d been reading about this battle that I’d been waging over this breath device and so he proposed to me to draft a bill that would allow judges to reduce fines so that we could order these devices if we deemed it appropriate. I was floored. I thought it was fantastic that he was offering to do this. He introduced Assembly Bill 2889 into the State Assembly; the then governor was George Deukmejian, a staunch Republican conservative. But that didn’t deter Byron Sher. So he introduced this bill, the bill went through the Assembly, went through the Senate and landed on the governor’s desk. It was fantastic. And there didn’t appear to be any opposition. That was until the judges on my court, the municipal court under the leadership of the then presiding judge, sent a letter to the governor letting the judge know that they weren’t crazy
about what I was doing. And so the governor picked up on this obviously, and he declined to sign this bill into law. It was a major setback for me. I was really upset that the judges on my court would do this and Byron Sher was upset as well. Well that was that--I’m trying to think of the year. That was in, I’m going to stop the tape a second. I was just trying to remember the date. This bill was vetoed, was not signed by the governor and that was in 1987. Now fast-forward five years. It’s now 1992, there’s another governor, it’s Pete Wilson, another conservative Republican and Byron Sher is no longer in the State Assembly. He’s now a State Senator. And what he did was to introduce a senate bill with the same provisions as were in the previous Assembly bill. This time Governor Wilson signed it. So what I’d been trying to do actually became law in 1992 and now we fast forward to today. As of today, the ignition interlock device is going to be mandatory in California and this decision was made was under the leadership of Governor Schwarzenegger. He signed the bill before he left office. And not only that, this device is now utilized in every state in the country. And so this was a real learning moment for me; that you can, one person, can make a change. And that one person, it started with me. Then the next person started, it then went to Byron Sher, and as a result things just kept moving, change happened, and now it’s just not a big deal for these devices to be ordered by judges to be installed in cars. And I’ll add, I did come up with a nickname for the device-- Blow and Go. So the Blow and Go is now something that’s very common and utilized now throughout the country. That pleases me very much that all of that happened. It was worth all of the angst that it generated.

Dr. Keller: When you were appointed to become a judge, you were appointed to municipal court. Ultimately you ended up on
superior court. How did that come about?

Judge
Cordell:

I was on the municipal court appointed by Jerry Brown in 1982. I was there and doing everything municipal court judges do and then in about 1987 I really started thinking about how I wanted to be on the superior court. At that time every municipal court judge aspired to be on the superior court. That's the big time, the big leagues. There are no people of color on the superior court at that time. That was really big time. We could be on the municipal court but not up that high. The only two ways in California one can move up in the judicial system is by election or by appointment. So you can run if there's an open seat. a seat to which the governor is not going to appoint or cannot appoint, or you can just be appointed. It's always easier to be appointed because you don't have to spend a lot of money. What you spend is some political capital. You have to get out and find people who can give you support, and call the governor on your behalf, and write letters, but it's not anywhere as costly as running for an open seat on the superior court. These courts are countywide, so if you run for a seat, you have to run for election and get a majority of voters in the entire country to vote for you. In 1987 I knew that a seat was going to open up on the superior court. The timing of it was such that the judge who was retiring was doing it at such a time that the governor could not appoint. I really think this judge did that deliberately because the judge felt that would just open the door for others maybe like me to at least have a shot at it. His name was Judge Wright. So Judge Wright announced his retirement and then people started lining up to see who was going to get that seat. I decided that I was going to run for that office because with the governor in that was currently in office, that was Governor George Deukmejian, there was no way that I was ever going to get
appointed. He and I did not see eye to eye on anything. On politics, he’s conservative. I’m liberal. He’s a Republican, I’m a Democrat. I’m a feminist. He was definitely not. In order to run--I’d never done anything like this before and I didn’t realize at the time I decided to forward that it was going to be as huge as it was --the first thing you need to do is get a campaign manager and so I just did what was easy and convenient. I went across the street to my neighbor who is a philosopher. Her name is Joan Holtzman, she lived across the street and was a good friend. I went over and I had a talk and asked if she would manage my campaign. She’d never done it before and boy did she do a job. We formed a team. I called it the kitchen cabinet. It was my partner Florence, who is interviewing me, and Joan. Just the three of us. And we would meet in our kitchen here and map out the campaign. This campaign started in January 1988. The election was in June 1988, so the next six months I spent going to Rotary meetings, going to coffee klatches, speaking at debates, speaking at all kinds of events. Anything that Joan came up with, I was there. In addition, I had to raise money. In 1988 to run a meaningful campaign I had to raise at least $100,000, meaning we had to set up a treasurer. I didn’t have anything to do with the money and mind you at this time I was also a sitting judge. I was working full time every day and having to do these events either in the morning before I went to work, at lunch time, in the evenings or on the weekends. And really that’s what my life was like. I also had my two daughters and was a single parent at the time. So they were in school at the time, let’s say 1988, my youngest was 8 and my oldest was 13. And they were involved in, and I had to deal with all their school activities. They were both athletes and musicians as well so there were all kinds of extra-curricular activities going on. When I look back now on how I did it all, I have
no idea. But we did it. There were all of these events; there was the constant raising of the money. Most of my money came from lawyers. What happens in judicial elections, is that lawyers just pick sides. They pick whoever they want to support and they give the money. I didn’t have an opponent until just, I think it was just hours before the deadline closed to announce. So had I been the only one. and had no one run against me, the seat would have been mine. I later learned that a group of good old boy judges were very concerned that I didn’t have any opposition and so they basically recruited someone to run against me. They recruited a white male, deputy district attorney. Prosecutors have a great track record in our county of winning judicial elections. People like prosecutors. So here I was, a sitting judge having to run a campaign and my opponent was a prosecutor who was given time off to campaign. It was a campaign that landed us in the news quite frequently. My opponent came out swinging, calling me names. At that time, Rose Bird was Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court and she was being pilloried by the right wing and conservatives. My opponent cast me as a Rose Bird clone, called me all sorts of things--he was very vicious. My tactic was to ignore him, to not run against him but to run for the seat. The only time I couldn’t ignore him was when we had a debate sponsored by the Bar Association and both of us had to get up and stand before all these lawyers and answer a lot of questions in debates--I had to take him on right then. And that campaigning went on for six months and finally it was election day and I cast my ballot. I am trying to think of the other things during the campaign I had to have, I had street signs up--I had to have all those printed. Also a number of kids volunteered to hand paint a bunch of election signs—they were amazing. And we did some mailers. When the votes were finally counted on election
day in June, I had won the election handily. I think I had 61 percent of the vote, and that’s pretty decisive, especially in a conservative county. So that’s how I became a superior court judge. Then I was sworn in. And then there was a little bit more drama. So I’d won the election and that meant that I could fill the seat starting the following January. From the June election straight through the following six months, the seat sat vacant. Ordinarily, when a judge wins a judicial seat in June, the governor just does an appointment, appoints the winner of the election early since nobody else can have that seat anyway. It’s routine, it is the way it is always done in California. I petitioned the court, actually the presiding judge of the Superior Court, who petitioned the governor and said governor, we have a judge now, she’s been elected, handily elected, would you please make the appointment now so we can fill this seat and get to work because there’s a lot that needs that needs to be done. Now I remind you that this was Governor Deukmejian who I had never met the man, but for whatever reason, the governor decided to do something that no other governor before him had ever done. And that is, he refused to appoint me to fill the seat that I had legitimately and overwhelmingly won. He refused to do it. He decided that... actually, I don’t know if this was to be vindictive or—I have no idea why. He decided it would be better just to let that seat stay open with no judge in and allow the workload of that judge not to be done until January. This hit the news because this was a first in the state of California, in the history of California. And when it hit the news, I was called by a reporter who told me the following: when Governor Deukmejian was interviewed by the press—he was getting ready to go on a plane, he was flying off to China I believe,—he was asked by someone in the press, why didn’t you appoint Judge Cordell to fill the seat that she won. And the governor said to the reporter, I
didn’t appoint her because I don’t want her ever to be able to say that she was a Deukmejian appointee. His exact words were “I don’t want her to ever tout the fact that she was Deukmejian appointee.” When I was told this by the reporter, I was absolutely amazed and a little stunned that I could hold such sway with this governor. The reporter asked if I had a response, and my response, which was printed in the paper and repeated many, many times by the media, was the following: “At last the governor and I have something in common. It would be a source of great embarrassment to both of us if I were to be touted as a Deukmejian appointee.” I was very pleased with that quote, by the way, as were many people. But, as it turned out, that seat didn’t stay open. What happened was that the then Presiding Judge of the Superior Court went to the Chief Justice of the California Supreme Court and obtained an emergency appointment, basically it’s called a temporary appointment, and had me temporarily appointed to the seat that I had permanently earned, in January. So I was sworn in officially in January but I was able to take the seat and start working before January, all because of the Chief Justice, Justice Lucas of the California Supreme Court. So therein was my odyssey from the Municipal Court to the Superior Court.

Dr. Keller: I think we pretty much talked about your time, your life as a legal person. But I’m curious, at the end of it, had you to do it all over again, would you have spent all the time on the bench that you did, or do you think you have preferred to pursue another facet of law?

Judge Cordell: I am absolutely clear that judging was the best thing that I could have done with the almost 20 years of my professional life. I spent doing it. I loved every bit of it. That is not to say there weren’t some really hard days,
some days where I cried driving home from work. But the job of judging, it just was an incredible opportunity. When you consider that there was then I think maybe 1600 judges in the entire state of California, to have had one of those slots, it was just amazing. I loved everything about the job. I loved wearing the robe. I loved sitting in the courtroom. I loved presiding over these cases. I loved telling people what to do. I loved the task of making these decisions, some of which were very, very difficult, some of which gave me such pleasure and fulfillment, like when I could perform an adoption or perform a wedding. And some of the instances in court were hilarious—it was just the human drama that gets played out in the courtroom, and being a trial judge, I got to be witness to it all and I just loved every bit of it. And also it’s important to me that the time that I was on the bench was a time when doors were just starting to open. Because of the courage of then Governor Brown to appoint so many judges who were women and people of color, this was in the 1980s, these doors have now flung wide open. And it’s just really not unusual, in fact it’s commonplace to see judges of color, to see women judges; you see them on TV, you see them in the drama shows on TV. It’s the norm. And that’s the way it should be. So to have been a part of all of that made all of my time on the bench even more gratifying. I wouldn’t have traded this for anything in the world.

Dr. Keller: This concludes my interview of Judge LaDoris Cordell regarding her legal career. It’s been a pleasure Judge Cordell. And just one last question: What are you up to now?
Judge Cordell: Since May 2010, I have been the Independent Police Auditor of the City of San Jose, California. I run an office that provides civilian oversight over the San Jose police. Basically, if someone has a complaint about an officer, the person calls our office. We also make recommendations to the police department to improve their policies and procedures. It’s an interesting job.

Thanks for taking the time for this interview.